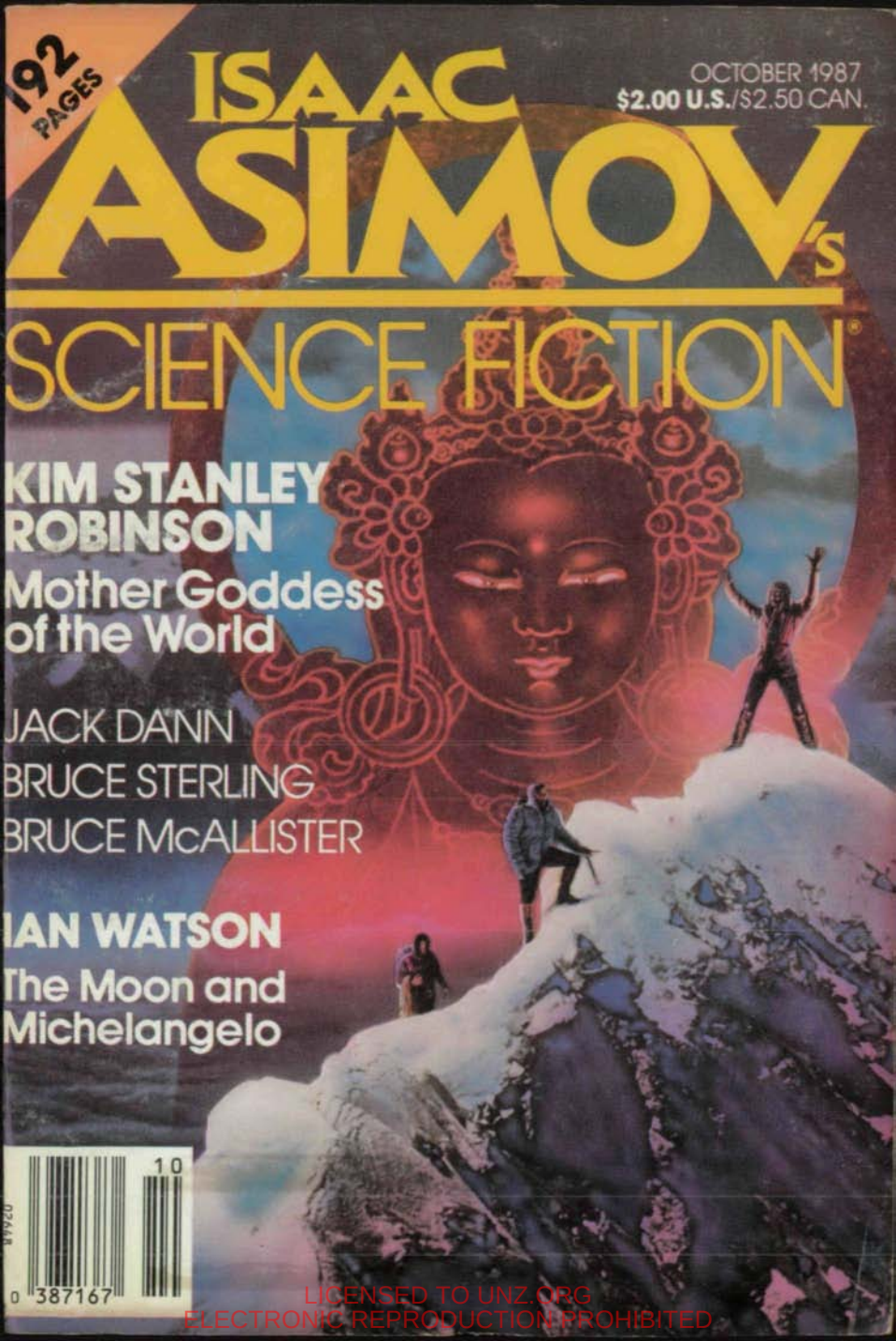

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

UNKNOWN

During the last few days, I have been leafing through *The Fantasy Almanac* by Jeff Rovin (Dutton, 1979) with a certain amount of pleasure. Rovin is very good on the Greek myths, folk-tales, and traditional monsters, though I'm a little ho-hum on the modern ephemera of super-heroes and movie-monsters.

There was, however, one entry which struck me as superfluous and that was "Asimov, Isaac." What Rovin said of me was accurate enough but there was nothing to give any hint that I had any connection with fantasy. The few works of mine which he cited were strictly science fiction. One of the spurs to my working my way through the book, then, was to see if I could find any justification for the inclusion.

I finally found it, for there, in the S's, was "Starr, Lucky," under which he listed my six Lucky Starr novels, originally published under the pseudonym of Paul French. At first, I thought this another gratuitous inclusion since my Lucky Starr books were strictly science fiction (nor does he imply anything else.) I then realized that he was thinking of Lucky Starr as a super-hero, in the long line ranging from Gilgamesh to the Incredible Hulk. Well, *I* don't think Lucky is anything more than a plain ordinary hero, but at least I have my explanation, which was all I wanted.

Much worse than the inclusion of your unhumble servant, however, was an exclusion. Rovin includes an entry on *Weird Tales,* as he should, but he does not include *Unknown,* the best fantasy magazine that ever existed or, in my opinion, is ever likely to exist.

The way it started, according to the story I heard at the time, was this. Eric Frank Russell submitted a story called "Forbidden Acres" to John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction.* It was a very powerful story of an Earth that is secretly controlled by extraterrestrials with an advanced technology. Certain Earthmen learn that "we are property" and try to fight it. Campbell wanted the story intensely but he felt that it was not legitimate SF and did not belong in the pages of *Astounding.* Rather than reject it, however, he determined to start a new magazine, one devoted to "adult fantasy." This magazine he named *Unknown* and

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its first issue was dated March, 1939. Its lead novel was the Eric Frank Russell tale, retitled "Sinister Barrier."

How well I remember the day that first issue arrived in my father's candy-store. (Good heavens, it was almost half a century ago—and it seems like yesterday.) I devoured the issue. "Sinister Barrier" was absolutely absorbing and the short stories that filled out the issue were like nothing I had ever seen before. One of them was Horace Gold's "Trouble With Water," a very funny story about an offended water-spirit.

The issues kept coming. The second issue featured L. Ron Hubbard's "The Ultimate Adventure," an Arabian Nights story of a kind Scheherazade might have told if she had had a better imagination. It also had the first part of L. Sprague de Camp's "Divide and Rule" a story of modern knights that put "Morte d'Arthur" way in the shade. Later issues contained de Camp's "Lest Darkness Fall," "The Mathematics of Magic," "The Roaring Trumpet," and "The Wheels of If"; Horace Gold's "None but Lucifer"; John MacCormac's "Enchanted Weekend"; Hubbard's "Slaves of Sleep," "Fear," and "Typewriter in the Sky"; Jack Williamson's "Darker Than you Think"; Fritz Leiber's "Conjure Wife"; Theodore Sturgeon's "It," "Shottle Bop," and "Yesterday was Monday" and so on, and so on.

The magazine continued for twenty-six glorious monthly issues

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but by the August 1941 issue the war in Europe was coming ever closer to the United States and the price of paper was going up. *Unknown's* circulation did not match that of *Astounding* and what paper could be obtained had to be reserved for the latter. *Unknown* therefore went bimonthly but moved to a larger size in an attempt to make up for it. It changed its name to *Unknown Worlds,* too. With the June 1943 issue it was back to a smaller size, and the October 1943 issue was its last. After thirty-nine issues, it died a war casualty.

Nor could it ever be revived. After the war, in 1948, Campbell edited a one-shot issue called *From Unknown Worlds,* containing a selection of reprints from the magazine, but it apparently didn't do well enough to warrant a revival, especially since Street & Smith, which had published the magazine, was about to put an end to all its pulp magazines, with the single exception of *Astounding.*

In 1939, the year of *Unknown*'s birth, I was desperately trying to sell stories of my own and, indeed, I had sold two stories before ever *Unknown* appeared, and two more in the month of its appearance. Naturally, considering my extravagant admiration for the magazine, I was bound to try to place a story in its pages.

Believe me, I hesitated. The writing that appeared in the magazine seemed to me to be so skilled that I despaired of equaling it. Nevertheless, shamefaced bashfulness is no part of my nature, and I tried. In July, 1939, I made my first attempt to penetrate the magazine's sinister barrier with my seventeenth story, "Life Before Birth." The next month, I tried my twenty-second story, "The Oak." In January, 1941, I sent in my twenty-seventh story, "Little Man on the Subway," in February, 1941, my twenty-ninth story, "Masks," and in June, 1941, my thirty-fourth, "Legal Rites."

All five stories were rejected at once and deservedly, since all five stories were simply terrible. (And this despite the fact that, in the months in which these stinkers had been turned out, I also wrote such well-regarded stories as "Reason," "Liar," and even "Nightfall.")

Two of those five stories, "Little Man on the Subway" and "Legal Rites" eventually appeared elsewhere, but I attribute this to the fact that Fred Pohl collaborated with me on them—the only times he and I ever collaborated. The other stories never appeared anywhere and the manuscripts (thank goodness) are now lost.

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed and in April, 1942, I departed for Philadelphia to work at the U.S. Navy Yard there. What's more, in July, 1942, I got married. Between my new job and my new wife, I did no writing for eleven months. (There were sizable gaps also when I finally found myself in the army, and when I was deeply engaged in my Ph.D. research, but

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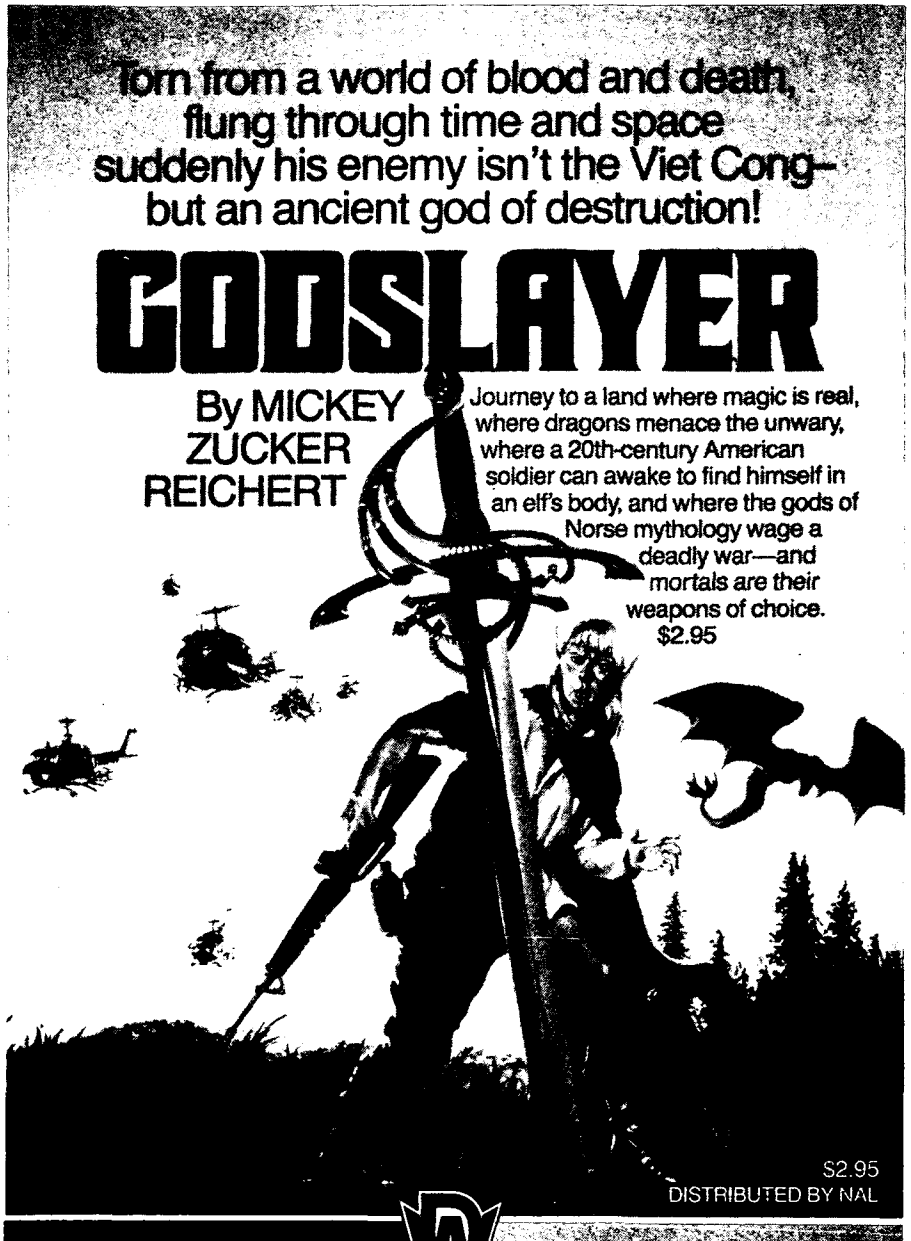

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DAW FANTASY

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in the last forty years, I am glad to say, I have never been completely away from my typewriter for more than a few days at a time.)

In January 1943, I finally felt the urge to write again, and, once again, I decided to attempt an *Unknown* story. Why not try again? It took me a while, for a six-day-a-week job and a seven-day-a-week wife cut into my time somewhat, but in April, 1943, I sent off my forty-third story, "Author! Author!" And it was at once *accepted.* At last, at last, I was an *Unknown* author.

It takes roughly six to nine months to get a story into print after acceptance, so I didn't expect to *see* myself an *Unknown* author until early 1944, but it was never to be. I told you earlier that the October, 1943 issue of the magazine was its last, and I got the news of the forthcoming shutdown on August 2, 1943. My story would not appear.

It was a terrible shock, and it might well have turned me off writing for an indefinite period to come, had I not, in the euphoria of the "Author! Author!" sale, promptly written my forty-fourth story, a science fiction story, "Death Sentence" and sold it. It appeared in the November, 1943 *Astounding*. That was the first month in which *Astounding* appeared in "digest-size," which is now the common size for science fiction magazines—such as the one you are holding now. That second sale kept me going.

There is an odd epilogue to the saga of my never getting to be an *Unknown* author.

In 1963, twenty years after the demise of *Unknown,* the writer Don Bensen was putting out a paperback collection of five stories from that magazine. He asked me to write the introduction and, of course, I did—and I was pleased at the chance of doing it, too.

In the course of the introduction, I told the sad tale of how I had tried to be an *Unknown* author, and had failed, and had continued to fail even though I finally sold a story to the magazine.

Bensen accepted the introduction, and sent me an excited letter. He had not known that I had had a story accepted by *Unknown*. Had he but known, he would have tried to include it in the collection. Since he now knew, he was going to arrange a second collection of stories that would include "Author! Author!" I was certainly willing, but I pointed out that the story was twenty years old and contained topical references that now dated it badly. Also, I said, *Astounding* controlled the reprint rights. Bensen dismissed the outdatedness with a shrug and negotiated a release from *Astounding*.

In 1964, then, the paperback anthology, *The Unknown Five* (Pyramid), appeared, with "Author! Author!" as the lead story.

I was an *Unknown* author at last, and the interval of twenty-two years between acceptance and publication is the longest such interval I ever suffered or am ever likely to suffer. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois,

This will probably sound trivial but I disapprove of listing Joe Haldeman's "Machines of Loving Grace" and "The Gift" with the short stories on the contents page of the December 1986 and February 1987 issues respectively. This practice is misleading to the person who happens to pick up a copy in a store and buys it because it contains a story by the author of *The Forever War*. Try to imagine the disappointment that person would feel if he/she didn't like poetry. I like poetry but I would guess that the majority of your readership doesn't share my feelings. I suggest that you redesign the contents page to include a poetry subheading and include the page numbers of all the poems, not just the longer ones.

I'm probably the only person who wishes that the novel *Vacuum Flowers* was serialized in four parts instead of three. I don't read serials until I have all the parts in my greedy paws. The mental anguish caused by wondering what happens next for an entire month just isn't worth it. I read each issue as I received it (except for the serial of course) and felt like I had been short changed. I don't feel satisfied when almost half of the fiction (72 out of 160 pages not including artwork and adverts) is taken up by the serial. I would have derived greater enjoyment if each installment was about twenty pages shorter and the novel was published over four issues. Then you could have published an extra story or two in each issue.

All I can say about this issue's fiction is "Wow!" There were no stories that I didn't enjoy although I wonder how a story that contains no fantastic elements and can only be considered mainstream, "The Moment of the Rose," came to be published here. I can't fault you for publishing it, however, because it is very good. I even liked the Good Doctor's "The Fights of Spring." I usually don't enjoy the George and Azazel stories but I liked the tongue-in-cheek portrayal of college life.

Steven Jordan
London, ON
Canada

But think! If we had published the novel in four parts, all the people who can't bear to read a serial till they have all the parts in their hot little hands would have to wait an extra month. If you feel short-changed while you're waiting, think how long-changed you will be when you settle back to read an entire novel as an extra bonus to all those excellent short stories.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been reading your magazine for many years now, and I have always been impressed with the quality and type of stories that are published in it. I also enjoy the other departments, especially the recently discontinued Martin Gardner math column.

Now, though, I have a major axe to grind. Lucius Shepard is a wonderful author. His stories are gripping, emotional, and brilliantly written. His major drawback is the use of explicit sex and violence. I see this often in today's "Rambo" world.

Do people today have such a low grasp of English that cussing is all they can do to express themselves? Mr. Shepard is a superb writer; why use cheap words and trashy R-rated situations? His writing doesn't need it. It seems to me that he is trying to sell himself to a "popular audience." I had hoped that science fiction fans would be above such needs.

Sincerely,

Andrew Cook
809 NE 7th Street
Madison, SD 57042

As an experiment, I have written my last two novels Foundation and Earth *and* Fantastic Voyage II *(not yet published) without any expletives, whatever, not even a "heck" or "darn." So far, no one seems to have noticed.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I'm not sure what that bit about Hitler not doing anything that was a crime by his own laws was supposed to prove. Do you mean that in any war whatsoever, all sides are equally wrong in fighting a war? Or that because Hitler thought he was in the right in attacking Poland, he was doing the right thing? Or that there is no standard by which to judge the actions of nations outside of their own laws? This is a puzzler.

For myself, I can't say that I can see how someone can simply be "against war," since I don't think that there is anyone who would really prefer war to peace, when these are considered solely in themselves. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a "peace-loving nation" as opposed to a "warlike nation."

St. Augustine pointed out long ago that all nations desire peace. It's just that many of them don't desire the peace that already exists. Hitler himself desired peace, he just desired that peace that would leave him in control of all of continental Europe. So of course he had to go to war to bring about the peace that he wanted.

This is why I become uneasy when people suggest that we should never fight. It's a bit difficult to keep a man such as Hitler from enslaving us unless we fight. Of course you can say that things have changed since the invention of the atomic bomb.

The survival of the whole human race is now at stake. The trouble with this argument is that I can imagine many things that could happen to the human race that would be worse than its extinction. So I'm not so sure that we should let the fear of a nuclear war dominate our actions.

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It also puzzles me to see everyone frantically worrying about nuclear war, when biological and chemical weapons present what could be a more dangerous threat. I suspect that this state of things is, to some extent, the result of the effect on the imagination of the visible power of nuclear weapons. There is also the influence of fashion and politics: the United States doesn't have an effective capacity for biological and chemical warfare, so that there are no visible targets for protest in this country.

To turn to your editorial, I don't think that it is correct to apply to literature the canons of progress that exist in science. In some sense we can say that modern physics is better than classical physics, since it is closer to a correct account of the physical world.

But modern literature is not better than the literature of the past. T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" does not supersede Dante's *Commedia.* If any poet today were to write a narrative poem using the sort of language and construction that Dante used, it would be a perfectly legitimate thing to do. It just wouldn't be in fashion.

Yours truly,

Frederick Fowler
Atlanta, GA

Poul Anderson said that war is not a crime because every nation treats war as legal. I therefore pointed out that this sort of argument also covers everything Hitler did. My argument is that war is a crime and that Hitler's deeds were criminal regardless of legalistic minutiae. Why is that a puzzler?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gentle Doctor Asimov;

This is quite possibly the most nit-picking point anyone has ever wasted a letter to point out to you, but I do feel obliged. In his column "Gaming," in the Mid-December issue, Matthew Costello refers to the "never-before-invaded" soil of the United States, so I must make mention of the oft-forgotten War of 1812 between the U.S.A. and the British Colony of British North America, now Canada. During the course of the war, the United States lost many forts and tracts of land in the Great Lakes region which were returned at the end of the war in 1815.

As well, a British force attacked Washington, burning much of the city as it passed through. (The subsequent painting over of the home of the president resulted in the creation of the "White" House.) Before anyone decides to bring up the Battle of New Orleans as a decisive battle that the Americans won, it should be noted that the attack took place after the war had officially ended. Sorry to waste time with this point, but I just had to.

While I'm writing, I would like to congratulate you on "Robot Dreams," which I felt was a fantastic story. I yearn for the old stories of Susan Calvin and the days when the positronic brain was still something of an unknown quality. I see from your editorial and your foreword to *Robots and Empire* that you do not enjoy the endless sequels, but I really enjoy reading them. Whenever I read one of the old stories, it's like slipping into a pair of comfortable old shoes. Could you possibly list the anthologies of your stories that would encompass

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all your early works, so that I can make sure I haven't missed any? I really would like to complete my collection.

Sincerely,
David Smillie
Walkerton, ON
Canada

Since you ask, I once wrote a book called The Early Asimov *(Doubleday, 1972) which included all my early stories (27 of them) that had not been included in any collection. It's out of print now but perhaps you can find a copy at a second-hand bookstore or something like that.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov,

After reading your editorial (I just happened to look through the magazine while looking for something in the bookstore) from the January 1987 issue I have decided to write this letter. I am going to try my hand at writing but there is another item that I would like to discuss, something that you alluded to in the editorial.

Having started reading SF in the early 50s because my dad was always reading it (*Analog, Galaxy, IF*) I grew up with the words from JWC editorials. Now here is the problem. Along about 1970-73 I found that the stories in *Analog* were no longer what I had looked forward to each month for twenty years. Also, the paperback novels, which I had always been able to read as fast as they appeared on the newsstands (up to the early 60s) were also changing. I still subscribe to *Analog*, but I have not read it, except for the book reviews, since 1974—quite a collection of reading material!

I do still read SF. Any new stories by you in the Foundation/Robot series, any Retief stories and any Saberhagen Berserker stories, but that is all. There are too many paperbacks now to read them all and since I enjoy stories that have a developed set of characters and histories I do not know which of the new writers are in the same league with the writers that I grew up with. Where do I find a list of stories that are just as good as the ones that I used to read and that are of the same type? Don't think that I am too narrow in my likes. I enjoy Tolkien very much, also Dr. Who and ElfQuest along with chess, computers, and ham radio. So, what is the problem, is it me or is it the SF?

What can I do to gain access to "the good, hard, fun SF" that I miss? If JWC were still around I could just read what he published, but who today is making sure that today's writers who do their thing in the style of the 50s will keep doing it that way? And, WHO are they? I just don't have time to read all the stories that are published.

Thank you for your time (everyone's most valuable resource).

Bill Ames
Sandy Hook, CT

I'm afraid that the 1950s are gone in the mists of the past. There are some old-timers (like myself) who still write in that style because we don't know any better, but these days people write in the style of the 1980s. I'm afraid there's no help for it. Thirty years from now readers will be dreaming of the "good old

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days" of the 1980s and wondering how to bring them back.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner & Sheila:

I feel the need to respond to your February letters column, which contains reactions to opinions I expressed in a 1985 interview in *Fantasy Review*. Michael Swanwick's Viewpoint article on "Postmodern" science fiction writers quoted me as saying that much of what we typically call the best modern SF can't stand up to the best fiction outside the field of the last couple of hundred years, and that "If SF wants to make it in the big leagues, it must face big league pitching."

First, I regret that Michael took my quote out of context. My first remark was followed by the sentence, "Not that their writing (that of Herbert, Heinlein, Asimov, Zelazny, and others) is bad, or that there aren't individual works of SF as good as anything the rest of literature can offer." The paragraph after my pitching metaphor began, "I want to add right away that there's no absolute standard—I may be totally wrong about individual writers on one side of the fence or the other. I may be forced to eat some crow. But I think it's fair to say that some things are better than others, and we can then have a reasonable discussion about what's what, and why we think so."

I think you can see from this that my intention in making these statements was not to close discussion about what is good or bad writing in SF, but to open it. And I think that such discussions, when

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based on wide reading, and when they avoid personal attacks, can offer fruitful insights. Science fiction can be better than it has been. I'm sure we have different ideas about what that "better" would be, but to act as if SF is perfect as is or that any change is necessarily for the worse is the kind of insulated thinking that has helped gain for SF much of the undeserved scorn it has gotten from intelligent readers of other kinds of fiction.

Like Mr. Kevin C. Cole, I am no great fan of the works of Raymond Carver. And as a college English professor as well as an SF reader and writer, I have had more occasion than most to encounter the ignorance of and contempt for SF some members of the so-called literary establishment show. But when Cole says "No honest story has been written by an American writer living in America since the deaths of Faulkner and Hemingway in the early 60s," I am so nonplussed as to hardly know how to react. When some ignorant mainstreamer makes such a blanket condemnation of SF we are justifiably outraged. We question the judgment or credentials of the speaker. Why should we take any more seriously an equivalent attack on *everything* that isn't SF? Even supposing Cole to be right, it still doesn't mean we can't learn from earlier mainstream writers—such as Hemingway or Faulkner or whomever you happen to like. Is this such a revolutionary position? Because that's essentially what I'm arguing for.

Likewise Dr. Asimov's response that we ought not to make fun of English lit teachers because "it is not kind to mock the handicapped." I understand the resentment that can be built up in SF lovers through years of undeserved neglect, but these reactions are not helpful. They only give whatever opposition there exists to a sympathetic acceptance of SF more ammunition.

Finally, I wholeheartedly agree with Pat Murphy's plea that we go easy on the categorizing of writers. It distorts our perceptions of their work and can foster hostility. In fact, the main things I regretted about Swanwick's article were the number of fine writers and kinds of writing that were left out, and the impression it gave that writers are or should be hostile to each other based on artistic differences. Sincerely,

John Kessel
Raleigh, NC

Consider the statement "If SF wants to make it in the big leagues, it must face big league pitching." What do you mean by "make it in the big leagues"? Money? Fame? Critical esteem? And what do you mean by "big league pitching"? Your critical evaluations? Someone else's? I admit that science fiction writers may take themselves a touch too seriously sometimes, but I have never heard one of them come within two light-years of the seriousness with which any academic critic takes himself.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm:*

I am a Christian high school student who is studying science. I would like to respond to Eric Schis-

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sel's letter (which was printed in November '86) in particular and the debate in *IAsfm* about the "theory" of creationism in general. I am deeply disturbed to see Christians branded as closed-minded ignoramuses, and even more deeply disturbed that Mr. Schissel seems to think that most Christians believe creationism to be a scientific theory. Of course a belief based solely on the Bible is not "scientifically" provable! I, and many other devout Christians that I know, do not advocate the teaching of creationism as a scientific theory; our belief that God created the universe is based solely on personal faith. Furthermore, we do not grudgingly admit that scientific evidence seems to indicate a universe that is several billion years old; we joyfully acknowledge this as a part of God's incredible creation. We are secure enough in our faith to realize that the first chapter of Genesis is subject, like many parts of the Old Testament, to more than a purely literal, strictly chronological interpretation, and we do not feel that it is necessary to try to alter the findings of an objective investigation of God's universe to make them match God's sacred word. In fact, the first six days of creation described in Genesis have been interpreted as other than literal twenty-four-hour periods by Christian thinkers at least as far in the past as St. Augustine (354-430). Many great scientists of the past and present [i.e. Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), John Fleming (1785-1857)] have been Christian, and many more (Charles Darwin and Francis Bacon, for example) have believed in a creating God. As one prominent scientist wrote of evolution, "There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one."[1] I am perturbed to find that isolated but well-publicized fundamentalists have produced a popular misconception that Christianity and a scientifically open mind are mutually exclusive.

I hope that I have brought up some thought-provoking ideas for the Good Doctor as well as everyone else following the enjoyable extended letter debates in *IAsfm*. (Just for the record, I'm pro-characterization, anti-censorship.) As always, I look forward to the next issue.

Elizabeth Palmberg
Miami, FL

---

[1]Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species*, Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, Publishers.

Very good. You seem to agree with me and to disagree with Jerry Falwell and the other ideologues of Fundamentalism. Have you ever tried arguing with some of those literalists and explaining your own Christian views to them? It might be interesting.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Eureka! I've finally found a magazine with *good* sci-fi. I'm a subscriber for life.

Now, an observation . . . Science fiction stories in your magazine and elsewhere are constantly referring to either (1) magnetic- or (2) Velcro-soled footwear for the

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purpose of maintaining one's contact with the "floor" in a weightless environment. Both of these proposed solutions to the problems posed by weightlessness are specious ones.

Magnetic footwear suggests the use of ferrous metals in hulls, decks, etc., which is unlikely considering that stronger *and* lighter substitutes (both metallic and non-metallic) have already been developed. In fact, airplanes haven't been made of steel for forty years.

The second suggestion, Velcro-soled shoes, implies a dirt-free environment and for this reason seems impractical to me. Has Velcro been used on the shuttle program?
Sincerely,

Dave St. John

My own feeling is that non-gravitational methods of sticking to the floor in a weightless state would always give the feeling of "stickiness." You would wrench the shoe upward and have it clump downward. I'm sure I would hate it and would rather float.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

I'd like, if I may, to write a short open letter to all the readers of your fine magazine.

Dear Wonderful Readers,

I have been writing science-fiction for over thirty years and during that time have received many complimentary fan letters from some of you. I enjoy your letters, really I do. And I try to be conscientious, as I'm sure most of my fellow SF writers do also, to respond as best I can.

BUT . . . even in the best-run offices, envelopes are sometimes lost. If you haven't put your name and address on your letter, it becomes impossible to acknowledge your kind words. That makes me feel badly. I can just hear some of you out there saying, "Well, that stuck-up guy! I wrote him twenty-nine pages about my doctoral thesis on his work, and he didn't even send me a lousy postcard!"

So, please, remember to put down your address on the letter when you write as well as the envelope. And Miss Susan J. Curtis of unknown address and unknown state: Please write again. I'd really like to answer your nice letter. But I can't.

The envelope was thrown away.
Sincerely,

Robert Sheckley
Portland, OR

May I wholeheartedly second Bob's letter. I, too, have precisely this trouble in many cases. And so does every writer, I think.

—Isaac Asimov

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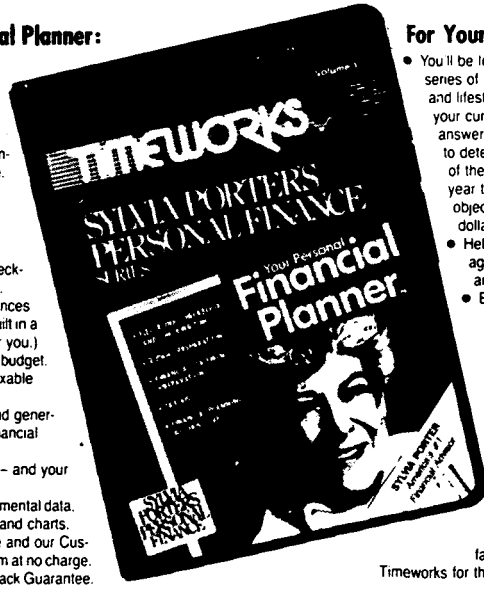

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1ST ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo: Jane Jewell

Standing: Sheila Williams and Gardner Dozois. Seated: James Patrick Kelly, Connie Willis, and Isaac Asimov.

Well, after an enthusiastic response, the vote is in, and the winners of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*'s First Annual Readers' Award poll have been selected. These were *your* choices, the stories *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the fiction we published during 1986. The readers were the only judges for this particular award, and it's intriguing to compare results with the Nebulas and Hugos, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle*. At any rate, this year's winners, and runners-up, were:

Novella

1. **Spice Pogrom, Connie Willis**
2. R&R, Lucius Shepard
3. Voice in the Dark, Jack McDevitt
4. Escape from Kathmandu, Kim Stanley Robinson
5. Gilgamesh in the Outback, Robert Silverberg

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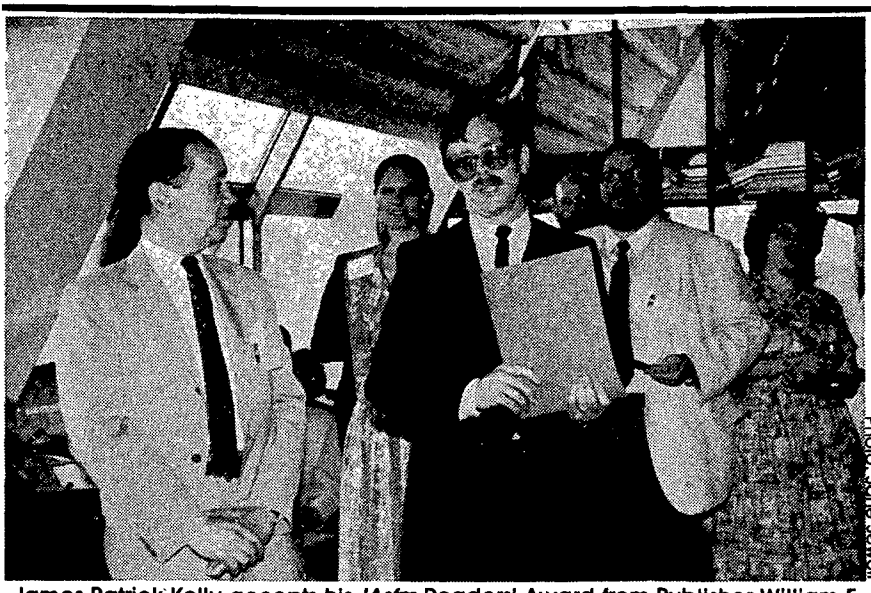

Photo: Jane Jewell

James Patrick Kelly accepts his *IAsfm* Readers' Award from Publisher William F. Battista (*l*) and Editor Gardner Dozois (*r*).

Novelette

1. **The Prisoner of Chillon, James Patrick Kelly**
2. Windows, Ian Watson
3. Hatrack River, Orson Scott Card
4. The Glass Flower, George R.R. Martin
5. A Place To Stay for a Little While, Jim Aikin

Short Story

1. **Robot Dreams, Isaac Asimov**
2. Laugh Track, Harlan Ellison
3. Down and Out in the Year 2000, Kim Stanley Robinson
4. Jeff Beck, Lewis Shiner

(tie) 5. Stop Motion, Tim Sullivan
5. Close Encounter with the Deity, Michael Bishop

The awards were presented at a party at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in New York City on June 17, 1987; *Analog*'s AnLab Awards were also presented at this time. All three of *IAsfm*'s winners were on hand to accept their awards (in addition to almost a hundred other guests, including many writers, editors, agents, and artists), hors d'oeuvres circulated and drinks flowed long into the night, and, it is confidently to be hoped, a good time was had by all.

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

First, a word about Steve Jackson.

I'm not sure whether Steve is wealthy yet. He certainly deserves it, but I'm pretty sure that Steve Jackson Games, like a lot of the game companies, is no GM.

One of the first games to catch my adult interest, and hold it, was Steve's *The Fantasy Trip* (Metagaming), with its succession of challenging solo adventures and quick miniature-based combat system. Steve's current magnum opus, *The Generic Universal Role-Playing System,* is, in many ways, the successor to *The Fantasy Trip.*

But before that, there was *Ogre.*

Packed in a slim, plastic box the size of a paperback, *Ogre* was a bruiser of a game. The scenario was very straightforward. A MVIII Ogre was programmed to destroy a heavily protected Command Post amidst the craters and rubble of an alien terrain.

The defender was armed with heavy tanks, missile launchers, and infantry, while all the poor attacker had was a single Ogre.

Yes, just a single Ogre tank . . . armed with missiles, a main battery, secondary battery, and antipersonnel weaponry. The rules came with an effective solitaire scenario that controlled the movement of the Ogre while you scrambled around in a desperate hit and run attempt to stop the massive Ogre from destroying your Command Post.

Which, in most cases, failed.

Ogre was fun, a fan favorite, and the best five bucks you ever spent for a game. And, quite obviously, it was a natural for a computer game.

Origin Systems' *Ogre* (available from Electronic Arts, 1820 Gateway Drive, San Mateo, CA 94404) preserves the best features of this compact game while adding sleek graphics and an easy to use program.

Players can take either the Ogre or the defender's role. Then, a battlefield is selected, complete with craters, rubble, and other obstructions, and the defender's forces are deployed. The Ogre enters from the bottom of the map screen, moving and firing at any targets in range. The defender then moves his or her forces, fires, and Ground Effect Vehicles, if any, can complete their movement.

And that's just about it. Simple,

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straightforward techno-tank bashing. Not exactly socially redeeming, but very therapeutic. The program provides a variety of helpful unassuming touches. Preset battlefields can be selected and a range option can tell a player the movement/firing range of his forces.

My only complaint is the manner of giving the movement and firing orders. A small black triangle is moved over the force to be moved, the button pressed, and the unit is "dragged"—as the rules described it—to the new location. Many times my unit would somehow slip away, and I'd have to go back and drag it again. Selecting a target is carried out in a similar fashion.

But small quibbles aside, *Ogre* is a near-perfect recreation of one of SF's classic games.

Back to Steve . . .

Steve Jackson Games' hottest property in recent years has been *Car Wars,* an award-winning game that's been on *Omni Magazine*'s ten best games list, as well as one of the "Games 100 Selections." Now, to be honest, *Car Wars* never grabbed me in the way *Ogre* did. Too fussy, too many rules, though it was essentially a simulation of demolition-speedway antics gone amuck, circa the year 2030.

But there must be a lot of frustrated motorists out there who'd like nothing better than to ram a heat-seeking missile up some road hog's exhaust pipe. Drive Offensively, the AADA (American AutoDuel Association) suggested. The life you save may be your own.

Again, Origin Systems has created the computer game. It's called *AutoDuel* (also distributed by Electronic Arts) and it's a very exciting game. You start as a little computer sprite-man, strolling around, trying your luck in the arena on amateur night, driving what looks like a heavily armored Volkswagen. You compete in order to win enough money to buy a high performance machine that can handle the rough and tumble life of an AutoDuelist.

The game features a variety of towns offering AutoDuel arenas, competitions, cloning salons (extremely helpful when your character bites the dirt), bars (good for rumors), and other useful shops. And, until you get your own wheels, you can bus from town to town, perhaps trying your luck at the casino at Atlantic City.

Again, *AutoDuel* is an easily played (if not mastered) computer game. From both this release and *Ogre,* it's easy to see that a lot of thought has gone into using the program to make game play easier, not just more complicated. ●

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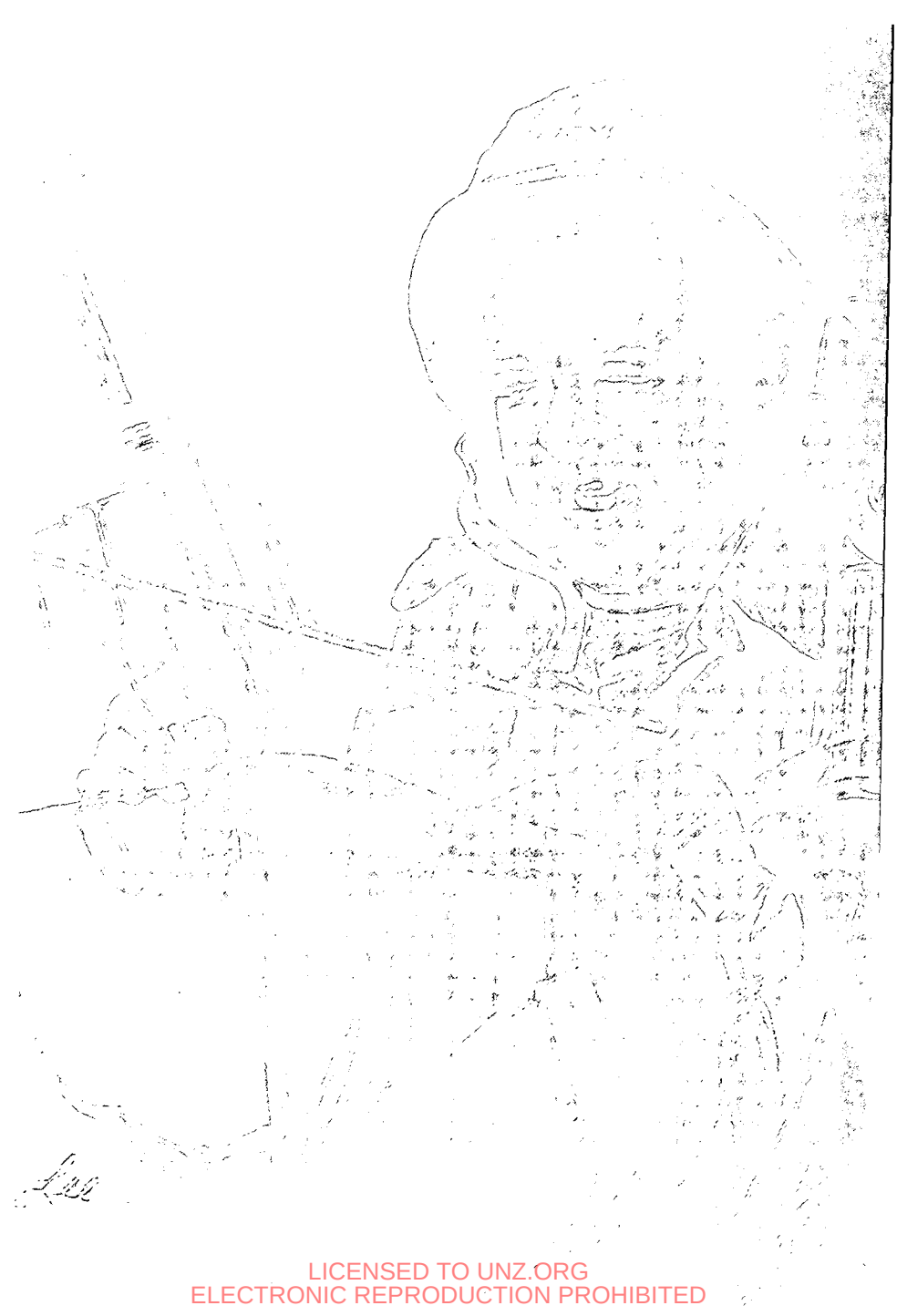

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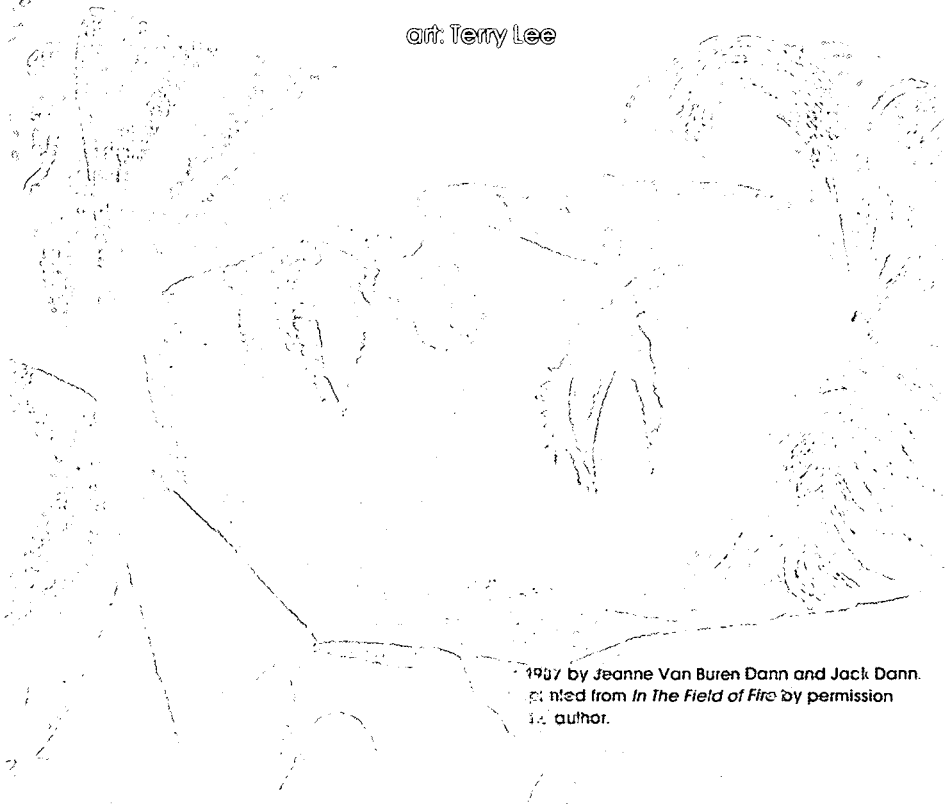
DREAM BABY

by Bruce McAllister

"Dream Baby" is a powerfully-convincing tale about the horrors of war and the people who have to face them. The author's first story, "The Faces Outside," was published in 1963 and reprinted in Judith Merril's *9th Annual of the Year's Best SF*. Since then he's sold forty short stories, and his novel, *Humanity Prime*, was published in Terry Carr's original "Ace Special" line. Mr. McAllister's most recent work has appeared in *Omni*.

art: Terry Lee



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I don't know whether I was for or against the war when I went. I joined and became a nurse to help. Isn't that why everyone becomes a nurse? We're told it's a good thing, like being a teacher or a mother. What they don't tell us is that sometimes you can't help.

Our principal gets on the PA one day and tells us how all these boys across the country are going over there for us and getting killed or maimed. Then he tells us that Tony Fischetti and this other kid are dead, killed in action, Purple Hearts and everything. A lot of the girls start crying. I'm crying. I call the Army and tell them my grades are pretty good, I want to go to nursing school and then 'Nam. They say fine, they'll pay for it but I'm obligated if they do. I say it's what I want. I don't know if any other girls from school did it. I really didn't care. I just thought somebody ought to.

I go down and sign up and my dad gets mad. He says I just want to be a whore or a lesbian, because that's what people will think if I go. I say, "Is that what you and Mom think?" He almost hits me. Parents are like that. What other people think is more important than what they think, but you can't tell them that.

I never saw a nurse in 'Nam who was a whore and I only saw one or two who might have been butch. But that's how people thought, back here in the States.

I grew up in Long Beach, California, a sailor town. Sometimes I forget that. Sometimes I forget I wore my hair in a flip and liked miniskirts and black pumps. Sometimes all I can remember is the hospitals.

I got stationed at Cam Ranh Bay, at the 23rd Medevac, for two months, then the 118th Field General in Saigon, then back to the 23rd. They weren't supposed to move you around like that, but I got moved. That kind of thing happened all the time. Things just weren't done by the book. At the 23rd we were put in a bunch of huts. It was right by the hospital compound, and we had the Navy on one side of us and the Air Force on the other side. We could hear the mortars all night and the next day we'd get to see what they'd done.

It began to get to me after about a week. That's all it took. The big medevac choppers would land and the gurneys would come in. We were the ones who tried to keep them alive, and if they didn't die on us, we'd send them on.

We'd be covered with blood and urine and everything else. We'd have a boy with no arms or no legs, or maybe his legs would be lying beside him on the gurney. We'd have guys with no faces. We'd have stomachs you could hold in your hands. We'd be slapping ringers and plasma into them. We'd have sump pumps going to get the secretions and blood out of them. We'd do this all day, day in and day out.

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You'd put them in bags if they didn't make it. You'd change dressings on stumps, and you had this deal with the corpsmen that every fourth day you'd clean the latrines for them if they'd change the dressings. They knew what it was like.

They'd bring in a boy with beautiful brown eyes and you'd just have a chance to look at him, to get a chest cut-down started for a subclavian catheter. He'd say, "Ma'am, am I all right?" and in forty seconds he'd be gone. He'd say "Oh, no" and he'd be gone. His blood would pool on the gurney right through the packs. Some wounds are so bad you can't even plug them. The person just drains away.

You wanted to help but you couldn't. All you could do was watch.

When the dreams started, I thought I was going crazy. It was about the fourth week and I couldn't sleep. I'd close my eyes and think of trip wires. I'd think my bras and everything else had trip wires. I'd be on the john and hear a sound and think that someone was trip-wiring the latch so I'd lose my hands and face when I tried to leave.

I'd dream about wounds, different kinds, and then the next day there would be the wounds I'd dreamed about. I thought it was just coincidence. I'd seen a lot of wounds by then. Everyone was having nightmares. I'd dream about a sucking chest wound and a guy trying to scream, though he couldn't, and the next day I'd have to suck out a chest and listen to a guy try to scream. I didn't think much about it. I couldn't sleep. That was the important thing. I knew I was going to go crazy if I couldn't sleep.

Sometimes the dreams would have all the details. They'd bring in a guy that looked like someone had taken an icepick to his arms. His arms looked like frankfurters with holes punched in them. That's what shrapnel looks like. You puff up and the bleeding stops. We all knew he was going to die. You can't live through something like that. The system won't take it. He knew he was going to die, but he wasn't making a sound. His face had little holes in it, around his cheeks, and it looked like a catcher's mitt. He had the most beautiful blue eyes, like glass. You know, like that dog, the weimersomething. I'd start shaking because he was in one of my dreams—those holes and his face and eyes. I'd shake for hours, but you couldn't tell anybody about dreams like that.

The guy would die. There wasn't anything I could do.

I didn't understand it. I didn't see a reason for the dreams. They just made it worse.

It got so I didn't want to go to sleep because I didn't want to have them. I didn't want to wake up and have to worry about the dreams all day,

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wondering if they were going to happen. I didn't want to have to shake all day, wondering.

I'd have this dream about a kid with a bad head wound and a phone call, and the next day they'd wheel in some kid who'd lost a lot of skull and brain and scalp, and the underlying brain would be infected. Then the word would get around that his father, who was a full-bird colonel stationed in Okie, had called and the kid's mother and father would be coming to see him. We all hoped he died before they got there, and he did.

I'd had a dream about him. I'd even dreamed that we wanted him to die before his mom and dad got there, and he did, in the dream he did.

When he died I started screaming and this corpsman who'd been around for a week or two took me by the arm and got me to the john. I'd gotten sick but he held me like my mom would have and all I could do was think what a mess I was, how could he hold me when I was such a mess? I started crying and couldn't stop. I knew everyone thought I was crazy, but I couldn't stop.

After that things got worse. I'd see more than just a face or the wounds. I'd see where the guy lived, where his hometown was and who was going to cry for him if he died. I didn't understand it at first—I didn't even know it was happening. I'd just get pictures, like before, in the dream and they'd bring this guy in the next day or the day after that, and if he could talk, I'd find out that what I'd seen was true. This guy would be dying and not saying a thing and I'd remember him from the dream and I'd say, "You look like a Georgia boy to me." If the morphine was working and he could talk, he'd say, "Who told you that, Lieutenant? All us brothers ain't from Georgia."

I'd make up something, like his voice or a good guess, and if I'd seen other things in the dream—like his girl or wife or mother—I'd tell him about those, too. He wouldn't ask how I knew because it didn't matter. How could it matter? He knew he was dying. They always know. I'd talk to him like I'd known him my whole life and he'd be gone in an hour, or by morning.

I had this dream about a commando type, dressed in tiger cammies, nobody saying a thing about him in the compound—spook stuff, Ibex, MAC SOG, something like that—and I could see his girlfriend in Australia. She had hair just like mine and her eyes were a little like mine and she loved him. She was going out with another guy that night, but she loved him, I could tell. In the dream they brought him into ER with the bottom half of him blown away.

The next morning, first thing, they wheeled this guy in and it was the dream all over again. He was blown apart from the waist down. He was delirious and trying to talk but his jaw wouldn't work. He had tiger

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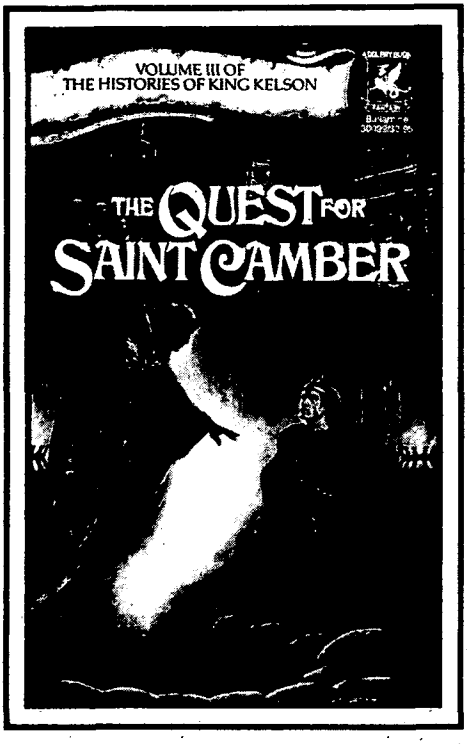

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cammies on and we cut them off. I was the one who got him and everyone knew he wasn't going to make it. As soon as I saw him I started shaking. I didn't want to see him, I didn't want to look at him. You really don't know what it's like, seeing someone like that and knowing. I didn't want him to die. I never wanted any of them to die.

I said, "Your girl in Australia loves you—she really does." He looked at me and his eyes had that look you get when morphine isn't enough. I could tell he thought I looked like her. He couldn't even see my hair under the cap and he knew I looked like her.

He grabbed my arm and his jaw started slipping and I knew what he wanted me to do. I always knew. I told him about her long black hair and the beaches in Australia and what the people were like there and what there was to do.

He thought I was going to stop talking, so he kept squeezing my arm. I told him what he and his girlfriend had done on a beach outside Melbourne, their favorite beach, and what they'd had to drink that night.

And then—this was the first time I'd done it with anyone—I told him what I'd do for him if I was his girlfriend and we were back in Australia. I said, "I'd wash you real good in the shower. I'd turn the lights down low and I'd put on some nice music. Then, if you were a little slow, I'd help you."

It was what his girlfriend always did, I knew that. It wasn't hard to say.

I kept talking, he kept holding my arm, and then he coded on me. They always did. I had a couple of minutes or hours and then they always coded on me, just like in the dreams.

I got good at it. The pictures got better and I could tell them what they wanted to hear and that made it easier. It wasn't just faces and burns and stumps, it was things about them. I'd tell them what their girlfriends and wives would do if they were here. Sometimes it was sexual, sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes I'd just ruffle their hair with my hand and tell them what Colorado looked like in summer, or what the last Doors concert they'd been to was like, or what you could do after dark in Newark.

I start crying in the big room one day and this corpsman takes me by the arm and the next thing I know I'm sitting on the john and he's got a needle in his hand, a two percent solution. He doesn't want to see me hurting so much. I tell him no. Why, I don't know. Every week or so I'd walk into the john and find somebody with a needle in their arm, but it wasn't for me, I thought. People weren't supposed to do that kind of thing. Junkies on the Pike back home did it—we all knew that—but not doctors and medics and nurses. It wasn't right, I told myself.

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I didn't start until a couple of weeks later.

There's this guy I want to tell you about. Steve—his name was Steve.

I come in one morning to the big ER room shaking so hard I can't even put my cap on and thinking I should've gotten a needle already, and there's this guy sitting over by a curtain. He's in cammies, his head's wrapped and he's sitting up real straight. I can barely stand up, but here's this guy looking like he's hurting, so I say, "You want to lie down?"

He turns slowly to look at me and I don't believe it. I know this guy from a dream, but I don't see the dream clearly. Here's this guy sitting in a chair in front of me unattended, like he could walk away any second, but I've had a dream about him, so I know he's going to die.

He says he's okay, he's just here to see a buddy. But I'm not listening. I know everything about him. I know about his girlfriend and where he's from and how his mom and dad didn't raise him, but all I can think about is, he's going to die. I'm thinking about the supply room and needles and how it wouldn't take much to get it all over with.

I say, "Cathy misses you, Steve. She wishes you could go to the Branding Iron in Merced tonight, because that band you like is playing. She's done something to her apartment and she wants to show it to you."

He looks at me for a long time and his eyes aren't like the others. I don't want to look back at him. I can see him anyway—in the dream. He's real young. He's got a nice body, good shoulders, and he's got curly blond hair under those clean bandages. He's got eyelashes like a girl, and I see him laughing. He laughs every chance he gets, I know.

Very quietly he says, "What's your name?"

I guess I tell him, because he says, "Can you tell me what she looks like, Mary?"

Everything's wrong. The guy doesn't sound like he's going to die. He's looking at me like he understands.

I say something like "She's tall." I say, "She's got blond hair," but I can barely think.

Very gently he says, "What are her eyes like?"

I don't know. I'm shaking so hard I can barely talk, I can barely remember the dream.

Suddenly I'm talking. "They're green. She wears a lot of mascara, but she's got dark eyebrows, so she isn't really a blond, is she."

He laughs and I jump. "No, she isn't," he says and he's smiling. He takes my hand in his. I'm shaking badly but I let him, like I do the others. I don't say a word.

I'm holding it in. I'm scared to death. I'm cold-turkeying and I'm letting him hold my hand because he's going to die. But it's not true. I dreamed about him, but in the dream he didn't die. I know that now.

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He squeezes my hand like we've known each other a long time and he says, "Do you do this for all of them?"

I don't say a thing.

Real quietly he says, "A lot of guys die on you, don't they, Mary."

I can't help it—I start crying. I want to tell him. I want to tell someone, so I do.

When I'm finished he doesn't say something stupid, he doesn't walk away. He doesn't code on me. He starts to tell me a story and I don't understand at first.

There's this G-2 reconnaissance over the border, he says. The insertion's smooth and I'm point, I'm always point. We're humping across paddy dikes like grunts and we hit this treeline. This is a black op, nobody's supposed to know we're here, but somebody does. All of a sudden the goddamn trees are full of Charlie ching-ching snipers. The whole world turns blue—just for me, I mean, it turns blue—and everything starts moving real slow. I can see the first AK rounds coming at me and I step aside nicely just like that, like always.

The world always turns blue like that when he needs it to, he says. That's why they make him point every goddamn time, why they keep using him on special ops to take out infrastructure or long-range recon for intel. Because the world turns blue. And how he's been called in twice to talk about what he's going to do after this war and how they want him to be a killer, he says. The records will say he died in this war and they'll give him a new identity. He doesn't have family, they say. He'll be one of their killers wherever they need him. Because everything turns blue. I don't believe what I'm hearing. It's like a movie, like that *Manchurian Candidate* thing, and I can't believe it. They don't care about how he does it, he says. They never do. It can be the world turning blue or voices in your head or some grabass feeling in your gut, or, if you want, it can be God or the Devil with horns or Little Green Martians—it doesn't matter to them what you believe. As long as it works, as long as you keep coming back from missions, that's all they care about. He told them no, but they keep on asking. Sometimes he thinks they'll kill his girlfriend just so he won't have anything to come back to in the States. They do that kind of thing, he says. I can't believe it.

So everything's turning blue, he says, and I'm floating up out of my body over this rice paddy, these goddamn ching-ching snipers are darker blue, and when I come back down I'm moving through this nice blue world and I know where they are, and I get every goddamn one of them in their trees.

But it doesn't matter, he says. There's this light-weapons sergeant, a guy they called the Dogman, who's crazy and barks like a dog and makes everyone laugh even if they're bleeding, even if their guts are hanging

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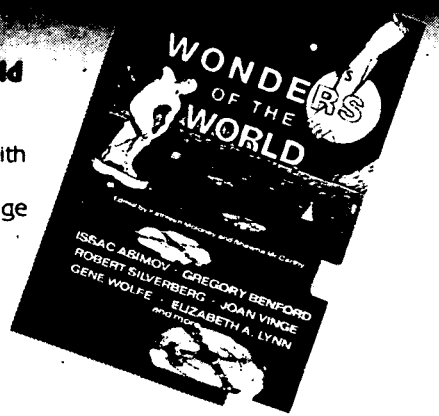

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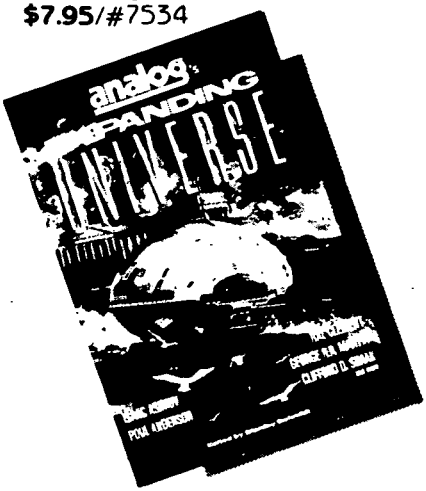

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out. He scares the VC when he barks. He humps his share and the men love him.

When the world turns blue, the Dogman's in cover, everything's fine, but then he rubbernecks, the sonuvabitch rubbernecks for the closest ching-ching—he didn't have to, he just didn't have to—and takes a round high. I don't see the back of his head explode, so I think he's still alive. I go for him where he's hanging half out of the treeline, half in a canal full of stinking rice water. I try to get his body out of the line of fire, but Charlie puts the next round right in under my arm. I'm holding the Dogman and the round goes in right under my arm, a fucking heart shot. I can feel it come in. It's for me. Everything goes slow and blue and I jerk a little—I don't even know I'm doing it—and the round slides right in under me and into him. They never get *me*. The fucking world turns blue and everything goes slow and they never get *me*.

I can always save myself, he says—his name is Steve and he's not smiling now—but I can't save *them*. What's it worth? What's it worth if you stay alive and everybody you care about is dead? Even if you get what *they*, want.

I know what he means. I know now why he's sitting on a chair nearly crying, I know where the body is, which curtain it's behind, how close it's been all this time. I remember the dream now.

Nobody likes to die alone, Steve says. Just like he said it in the dream.

He stays and we talk. We talk about the dreams and his blue world, and we talk about what we're going to do when we get out of this place and back to the Big PX, all the fun we're going to have. He starts to tell me about other guys he knows, guys like him that his people are interested in, but then he stops and I see he's looking past me. I turn around.

There's this guy in civvies at the end of the hallway, just standing there, looking at us. Then he nods at Steve and Steve says, "I got to go."

Real fast I say, "See you at nineteen hundred hours."

He's looking at the guy down the hallway. "Yeah, sure," he says.

When I get off he's there. I haven't thought about a needle all day and it shows. We get a bite to eat and talk some more, and that's that. My roommate says I can have the room for a couple of hours, but I'm a mess. I'm shaking so bad I can't even think about having a good time with this guy. He looks at me like he knows this, and says his head hurts and we ought to get some sleep.

He gives me a hug. That's it.

The same guy in civvies is waiting for him and they walk away together on Phan Hao Street.

The next day he's gone. I tell myself maybe he was standing down for

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a couple of days and had to get back, but that doesn't help. I know lots of guys who traveled around in-country AWOL without getting into trouble. What could they do to you? Send you to 'Nam?

I thought maybe he'd call in a couple of days, or write. Later I thought maybe he'd gotten killed, maybe let himself get killed. I really didn't know what to think, but I thought about him a lot.

Ten days later I get transferred. I don't even get orders cut, I don't even get in-country travel paper. No one will tell me a thing—the head nurse, the CO, nobody.

I get scared because I think they're shipping me back to the States because of the smack or the dreams—they've found out about the dreams—and I'm going to be in some VA hospital the rest of my life. That's what I think.

All they'll tell me is that I'm supposed to be at the strip at 0600 hours tomorrow, fatigues and no ID.

I get a needle that night and I barely make it.

This Huey comes in real fast and low and I get dust in my eyes from the prop wash. A guy with a clipboard about twenty yards away signals me and I get on. There's no one there to say good-bye and I never see the 23rd again.

The Huey's empty except for these two pilots who never turn around and this doorgunner who's hanging outside and this other guy who's sitting back with me on the canvas. I think maybe he's the one who's going to explain things, but he just stares for a while and doesn't say a thing. He's a sergeant, a Ranger, I think.

It's supposed to be dangerous to fly at night in Indian Country, I know, but we fly at night. We stop twice and I know we're in Indian Country. This one guy gets off, another guy gets on, and then two more. They seem to know each other and they start laughing. They try to get me to talk. One guy says, "You a Donut Dolly?" and another guy says, "Hell, no, asshole, she's Army, can't you tell? She's got the thousand yards." The third guys says to me, "Don't mind him, ma'am. They don't raise 'em right in Mississippi." They're trying to be nice, but I don't want in.

I don't want to sleep either. But my head's tipped back against the steel and I keep waking up, trying to remember whether I've dreamed about people dying, but I can't. I fall asleep once for a long time and when I wake up I can remember death, but I can't see the faces.

I wake up once and there's automatic weapon fire somewhere below us and maybe the slick gets hit once or twice. Another time I wake up

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and the three guys are talking quietly, real serious, but I'm hurting from no needle and I don't even listen.

When the rotors change I wake up. It's first light and cool and we're coming in on this big clearing, everything misty and beautiful. It's triple-canopy jungle I've never seen before and I know we're so far from Cam Ranh Bay or Saigon it doesn't matter. I don't see anything that looks like a medevac, just this clearing, like a staging area. There are a lot of guys walking around, a lot of machinery, but it doesn't look like regular Army. It looks like something you hear about but aren't supposed to see, and I'm shaking like a baby.

When we hit the LZ the three guys don't even know I exist and I barely get out of the slick on my own. I can't see because of the wash and suddenly this Green Beanie medic I've never seen before—this captain—*has me by the arm and he's taking me somewhere.* I tell myself I'm not going back to the Big PX, I'm not going to some VA hospital for the rest of my life, that this is the guy I'm going to be assigned to—they need a nurse out here or something.

I'm not thinking straight. Special Forces medics don't have nurses.

I'm looking around me and I don't believe what I'm seeing. There's bunkers and M-60 emplacements and Montagnard guards on the perimeter and all this beautiful red earth. There's every kind of jungle fatigue and cammie you can think of—stripes and spots and black pajamas like Charlie and everything else. I see Special Forces enlisted everywhere and I know this isn't some little A-camp. I see a dozen guys in real clean fatigues who don't walk like soldiers walk. I see a Special Forces major and he's arguing with one of them.

The captain who's got me by the arm isn't saying a thing. He takes me to this little bunker that's got mosquito netting and a big canvas flap over the front and he puts me inside. It's got a cot. He tells me to lie down and I do. He says, "The CO wants you to get some sleep, Lieutenant. Someone will come by with something in a little while." The way he says it I know he knows about the needles.

I don't know how long I'm in the bunker before someone comes, but I'm in lousy shape. This guy in civvies gives me something to take with a little paper cup and I go ahead and do it. I'm not going to fight it the shape I'm in. I dream, and keep dreaming, and in some of the dreams someone comes by with a glass of water and I take more pills. I can't wake up. All I can do is sleep but I'm not really sleeping and I'm having these dreams that aren't really dreams. Once or twice I hear myself screaming, it hurts so much, and then I dream about a little paper cup and more pills.

When I come out of it I'm not shaking. I know it's not supposed to be

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this quick, that what they gave me isn't what people are getting in programs back in the States, and I get scared again. Who are these guys?

I sit in the little bunker all day eating ham-and-mother-fuckers from C-rat cans and I tell myself that Steve had something to do with it. I'm scared but it's nice not to be shaking. It's nice not to be thinking about a needle all the time.

The next morning I hear all this noise and I realize we're leaving, the whole camp is leaving. I can hear this noise like a hundred slicks outside and I get up and look through the flap. I've never seen so many choppers. They've got Chinooks and Hueys and Cobras and Loaches and a Skycrane for the SeaBee machines and they're dusting off and dropping in and dusting off again. I've never seen anything like it. I keep looking for Steve. I keep trying to remember the dreams I had while I was out all those days and I can't.

Finally the Green Beanie medic comes back. He doesn't say a word. He just takes me to the LZ and we wait until a slick drops in. All these tiger stripes pile in with us but no one says a thing. No one's joking. I don't understand it. We aren't being hit, we're just moving, but no one's joking.

We set up in a highlands valley northwest of where we'd been, where the jungle is thicker but it's not triple canopy. There's this same beautiful mist and I wonder if we're in some other country, Laos or Cambodia.

They have my bunker dug in about an hour and I'm in it about thirty minutes before this guy appears. I've been looking for Steve, wondering why I haven't seen him, and feeling pretty good about myself. It's nice not to be shaking, to get the monkey off my back, and I'm ready to thank *somebody*.

This guy opens the flap. He stands there for a moment and there's something familiar about him. He's about thirty and he's in real clean fatigues. He's got MD written all over him—but the kind that never gets any blood on him. I think of VA hospitals, psychiatric wards, and I get scared again.

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant?"

"Fine," I say, but I'm not smiling. I know this guy from the dreams—the little paper cups and pills—and I don't like what I'm feeling.

"Glad to hear it. Remarkable drug, isn't it, Lieutenant?"

I nod. Nothing he says surprises me.

"Someone wants to see you, Lieutenant."

I get up, dreading it. I know he's not talking about Steve.

They've got all the bunkers dug and he takes me to what has to be the CP. There isn't a guy inside who isn't in real clean fatigues. There are

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three or four guys who have the same look this guy has—MDs that don't ever get their hands dirty—and intel types pointing at maps and pushing things around on a couple of sand-table mock-ups. There's this one guy with his back turned and everyone else keeps checking in with him.

He's tall. He's got a full head of hair but it's going gray. He doesn't even have to turn around and I know.

It's the guy in civvies at the end of the hallway at the 23rd, the guy that walked away with Steve on Phan Hao Street.

He turns around and I don't give him eye contact. He looks at me, smiles, and starts over. There are two guys trailing him and he's got this smile that's supposed to be charming.

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant?" he says.

"Everybody keeps asking me that," I say, and I wonder why I'm being so brave.

"That's because we're interested in you, Lieutenant," he says. He's got this jungle outfit on with gorgeous creases and some canvas jungle boots that breathe nicely. He looks like an ad from a catalog but I know he's no joke, he's no strac lifer. He's wearing this stuff because he likes it, that's all. He could wear anything he wanted to because he's not military, but he's the CO of this operation, which means he's fighting a war I don't know a thing about.

He tells me he's got some things to straighten out first, but that if I go back to my little bunker he'll be there in an hour. He asks me if I want anything to eat. When I say sure, he tells the MD type to get me something from the mess.

I go back. I wait. When he comes, he's got a file in his hand and there's a young guy with him who's got a cold six-pack of Coke in his hand. I can tell they're cold because the cans are sweating. I can't believe it. We're out here in the middle of nowhere, we're probably not even supposed to be here, and they're bringing me cold Coke.

When the young guy leaves, the CO sits on the edge of the cot and I sit on the other and he says, "Would you like one, Lieutenant?"

I say, "Yes, sir," and he pops the top with a church key. He doesn't take one himself and suddenly I wish I hadn't said yes. I'm thinking of old movies where Jap officers offer their prisoners a cigarette so they'll owe them one. There's not even any place to put the can down, so I hold it between my hands.

"I'm not sure where to begin, Lieutenant," he says, "but let me assure you you're here because you belong here." He says it gently, real softly, but it gives me a funny feeling. "You're an officer and you've been in-country for some time. I don't need to tell you that we're a very special

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kind of operation here. What I do need to tell you is that you're one of three hundred we've identified so far in this war. Do you understand?"

I say, "No, sir."

"I think you do, but you're not sure, right? You've accepted your difference—your gift, your curse, your talent, whatever you would like to call it—but you can't as easily accept the fact that so many others might have the same thing, am I right, Mary—may I call you Mary?"

I don't like the way he says it but I say yes.

"We've identified three hundred like you, Mary. That's what I'm saying."

I stare at him. I don't know whether to believe him.

"I'm only sorry, Mary, that you came to our attention so late. Being alone with a gift like yours isn't easy, I'm sure, and finding a community of those who share it—the same gift, the same curse—is essential if the problems that always accompany it are to be worked out successfully, am I correct?"

"Yes."

"We might have lost you, Mary, if Lieutenant Balsam hadn't found you. He almost didn't make the trip for reasons that will be obvious later. If he hadn't met you, Mary, I'm afraid your hospital would have sent you back to the States for drug abuse if not for what they perceived as an increasingly dysfunctional neurosis. Does this surprise you?"

I say it doesn't.

"I didn't think so. You're a smart girl, Mary."

The voice is gentle, but it's not.

He waits and I don't know what he's waiting for.

I say, "Thank you for whatever it was that—"

"No need to thank us, Mary. Were that particular drug available back home right now, it wouldn't seem like such a gift, would it?"

He's right. He's the kind who's always right and I don't like the feeling.

"Anyway, thanks," I say. I'm wondering where Steve is.

"You're probably wondering where Lieutenant Balsam is, Mary."

I don't bother to nod this time.

"He'll be back in a few days. We have a policy here of not discussing missions—even in the ranks—and as commanding officer I like to set a good example. You can understand, I'm sure." He smiles again and for the first time I see the crow's-feet around his eyes, and how straight his teeth are, and how there are little capillaries broken on his cheeks.

He looks at the Coke in my hands and smiles. Then he opens the file he has. "If we were doing this the right way, Mary, we would get together in a nice air-conditioned building back in the States and go over all of this together, but we're not in any position to do that, are we?

"I don't know how much you've gathered about your gift, Mary, but

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people who study such things have their own way of talking. They would call yours a 'TPC hybrid with traumatic neurosis, dissociative features.' " He smiled. "That's not as bad as it sounds. It's quite normal. The human psyche always responds to special gifts like yours, and neurosis is simply a mechanism for doing just that. We wouldn't be human if it didn't, would we?"

"No, we wouldn't."

He's smiling at me and I know what he wants me to feel. I feel like a little girl sitting on a chair, being good, listening, and liking it, and that is what he wants.

"Those same people, Mary, would call your dreams 'spontaneous anecdotal material' and your talent a 'REM-state precognition or clairvoyance.' They're not very helpful words. They're the words of people who've never experienced it themselves. Only you, Mary, know what it really feels like inside. Am I right?"

I remember liking how that felt—*only you.* I needed to feel that, and he knew I needed to.

"Not all three hundred are dreamers like you, of course. Some are what those same people would call 'kinetic phenomena generators.' Some are 'tactility-triggered remoters' or 'OBE clears.' Some leave their bodies in a firefight and acquire information that could not be acquired in ordinary ways, which tells us that their talent is indeed authentic. Others see auras when their comrades are about to die, and if they can get those auras to disappear, their friends will live. Others experience only a vague visceral sensation, a gut feeling which tells them where mines and trip wires are. They know, for example, when a crossbow trap will fire and this allows them to knock away the arrows before they can hurt them. Still others receive pictures, like waking dreams, of what will happen in the next minute, hour, or day in combat.

"With very few exceptions, Mary, none of these individuals experienced anything like this as civilians. These episodes are the consequence of combat, of the metabolic and psychological anomalies which life-and-death conditions seem to generate."

He looks at me and his voice changes now, as if on cue. He wants me to feel what he is feeling, and I do, I do. I can't look away from him and I know this is why he is CO.

"It is almost impossible to reproduce them in a laboratory, Mary, and so these remarkable talents remain mere ancedotes, events that happen once or twice within a lifetime—to a brother, a mother, a friend, a fellow soldier in a war. A boy is killed on Kwajalein in 1944. That same night his mother dreams of his death. She has never before dreamed such a dream, and the dream is too accurate to be mere coincidence. He dies. She never has a dream like it again. A reporter for a major newspaper

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looks out the terminal window at the Boeing 707 he is about to board. He has flown a hundred times before, enjoys air travel, and has no reason to be anxious today. As he looks through the window the plane explodes before his very eyes. He can hear the sound ringing in his ears and the sirens rising in the distance; he can feel the heat of the ignited fuel on his face. Then he blinks. The jet is as it was before—no fire, no sirens, no explosion. He is shaking—he has never experienced anything like this in his life. He does not board the plane, and the next day he hears that its fuel tanks exploded, on the ground, in another city, killing ninety. The man never has such a vision again. He enjoys air travel in the months, and years, ahead, and will die of cardiac arrest on a tennis court twenty years later. You can see the difficulty we have, Mary."

"Yes," I say quietly, moved by what he's said.

"But our difficulty doesn't mean that your dreams are any less real, Mary. It doesn't mean that what you and the three hundred like you in this small theater of war are experiencing isn't real."

"Yes," I say.

He gets up.

"I am going to have one of my colleagues interview you, if that's all right. He will ask you questions about your dreams and he will record what you say. The tapes will remain in my care, so there isn't any need to worry, Mary."

I nod.

"I hope that you will view your stay here as deserved R&R, and as a chance to make contact with others who understand what it is like. For paperwork's sake, I've assigned you to Golf Team. You met three of its members on your flight in, I believe. You may write to your parents as long as you make reference to a medevac unit in Pleiku rather than to our actual operation here. Is that clear?"

He smiles like a friend would, and makes his voice as gentle as he can. "I'm going to leave the rest of the Coke. And a church key. Do I have your permission?" He grins. It's a joke, I realize. I'm supposed to smile. When I do, he smiles back and I know he knows everything, he knows himself, he knows me, what I think of him, what I've been thinking every minute he's been here.

It scares me that he knows.

His name is Bucannon.

The man that came was one of the other MD types from the tent. He asked and I answered. The question that took the longest was "What were your dreams like? Be as specific as possible both about the dream content and its relationship to reality—that is, how accurate the dream was as a predictor of what happened. Describe how the dreams and their

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relationship to reality (i.e., their accuracy) affected you both psychologically and physically (e.g., sleeplessness, nightmares, inability to concentrate, anxiety, depression, uncontrollable rages, suicidal thoughts, drug abuse)."

It took us six hours and six tapes.

We finished after dark.

I did what I was supposed to do. I hung around Golf Team. There were six guys, this lieutenant named Pagano, who was in charge, and this demo sergeant named Christabel, who was their "talent." He was, I found out, an "OBE clairvoyant with EEG anomalies," which meant that in a firefight he could leave his body just like Steve could. He could leave his body, look back at himself—that's what it felt like—and see how everyone else was doing and maybe save someone's ass. They were a good team. They hadn't lost anybody yet, and they loved to tease this sergeant every chance they got.

We talked about Saigon and what you could get on the black market. We talked about missions, even though we weren't supposed to. The three guys from the slick even got me to talk about the dreams, I was feeling that good, and when I heard they were going out on another mission at 0300 hours the next morning, without the sergeant—some little mission they didn't need him on—I didn't think anything about it.

I woke up in my bunker that night screaming because two of the guys from the slick were dead. I saw them dying out in the jungle, I saw how they died, and suddenly I knew what it was all about, why Bucannon wanted me here.

He came by the bunker at first light. I was still crying. He knelt down beside me and put his hand on my forehead. He made his voice gentle. He said, "What was your dream about, Mary?"

I wouldn't tell him. "You've got to call them back," I said.

"I can't, Mary," he said. "We've lost contact."

He was lying, I found out later: he could have called them back—no one was dead yet—but I didn't know that then. So I went ahead and told him about the two I'd dreamed about, the one from Mississippi and the one who'd thought I was a Donut Dolly. He took notes. I was a mess, crying and sweaty, and he pushed the hair away from my forehead and said he would do what he could.

I didn't want him to touch me, but I didn't stop him. I didn't stop him.

I didn't leave the bunker for a long time. I couldn't.

No one told me the two guys were dead. No one had to. It was the right kind of dream, just like before. But this time I'd *known* them. I'd met

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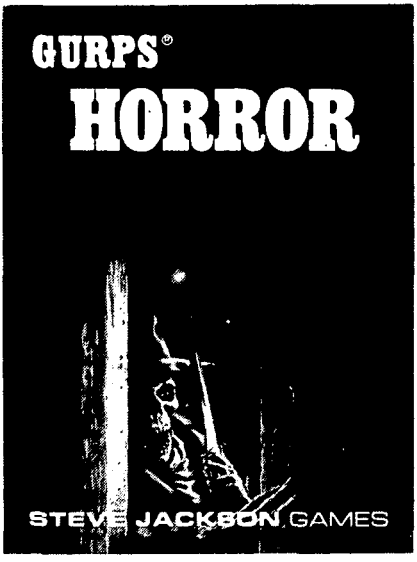

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them. I'd laughed with them in the daylight and when they died I wasn't there, it wasn't on some gurney in a room somewhere. It was different.

It was starting up again, I told myself.

I didn't get out of the cot until noon. I was thinking about needles, that was all.

He comes by again at about 1900 hours, just walks in and says, "Why don't you have some dinner, Mary. You must be hungry."

I go to the mess they've thrown together in one of the big bunkers. I think the guys are going to know about the screaming, but all they do is look at me like I'm the only woman in the camp, that's all, and that's okay.

Suddenly I see Steve. He's sitting with three other guys and I get this feeling he doesn't want to see me, that if he did he'd have come looking for me already, and I should turn around and leave. But one of the guys is saying something to him and Steve is turning and I know I'm wrong. He's been waiting for me. He's wearing cammies and they're dirty—he hadn't been back long—and I can tell by the way he gets up and comes toward me he wants to see me.

We go outside and stand where no one can hear us. He says, "Jesus, I'm sorry." I'm not sure what he means.

"Are you okay?" I say, but he doesn't answer.

He's saying, "I wasn't the one who told him about the dreams, Mary, I swear it. All I did was ask for a couple hours' layover to see you, but he doesn't like that—he doesn't like 'variables.' When he gets me back to camp, he has you checked out. The hospital says something about dreams and how crazy you're acting, and he puts it together. He's smart, Mary. He's real smart—"

I tell him to shut up, it isn't his fault, and I'd rather be here than back in the States in some VA program or ward. But he's not listening. "He's got you here for a reason, Mary. He's got all of us here for a reason and if I hadn't asked for those hours he wouldn't know you existed—"

I get mad. I tell him I don't want to hear any more about it, it isn't his fault.

"Okay," he says finally. "Okay." He gives me a smile because he knows I want it. "Want to meet the guys on the team? he says. "We just got extracted—"

I say sure. We go back in. He gets me some food and then introduces me. They're dirty and tired but they're not complaining. They're still too high off the mission to eat and won't crash for another couple of hours yet. There's an SF medic with the team, and two Navy SEALs because there's a riverine aspect to the mission, and a guy named Moburg, a

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Marine sniper out of Quantico. Steve's their CO and all I can think about is how young he is. They're all so young.

It turns out Moburg's a talent, too, but it's "anticipatory subliminal"—it only helps him target hits and doesn't help anyone else much. But he's a damn good sniper because of it, they tell me.

The guys give me food from their trays and for the first time that day I'm feeling hungry. I'm eating with guys that are real and alive and I'm really hungry.

Then I notice Steve isn't talking. He's got that same look on his face. I turn around.

Bucannon's in the doorway, looking at us. The other guys haven't seen him, they're still talking and laughing—being raunchy.

Bucannon is looking at us and he's smiling, and I get a chill down my spine like cold water because I know—all of a sudden I know—why I'm sitting here, who wants it this way.

I get up fast. Steve doesn't understand. He says something. I don't answer him, I don't even hear him. I keep going. He's behind me and he wants to know if I'm feeling okay, but I don't want to look back at him, I don't want to look at any of the guys with him, because that's what Bucannon wants.

He's going to send them out again, I tell myself. They just got back, they're tired, and he's going to send them out again, so I can dream about them.

I'm not going to go to sleep, I tell myself. I walk the perimeter until they tell me I can't do that anymore, it's too dangerous. Steve follows me and I start screaming at him, but I'm not making any sense. He watches me for a while and then someone comes to get him, and I know he's being told he's got to take his team out again. I ask for some Benzedrine from the Green Beanie medic who brings me aspirin when I want it but he says he can't, that word has come down that he can't. I try writing a letter to my parents but it's 0400 hours and I'm going crazy trying to stay awake because I haven't had more than four hours' sleep for a couple of nights and my body temperature's dropping on the diurnal.

I ask for some beer and they get it for me. I ask for some scotch. They give it to me and I think I've won. I never go to sleep on booze, but Bucannon doesn't know that. I'll stay awake and I won't dream.

But it knocks me out like a light, and I have a dream. One of the guys at the table, one of the two SEALs, is floating down a river. The blood is like a woman's hair streaming out from his head. I don't dream about Steve, just about this SEAL who's floating down a river. It's early in the mission. Somehow I know that.

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I don't wake up screaming, because of what they put in the booze. I remember it as soon as I wake up, when I can't do anything about it.

Bucannon comes in at first light. He doesn't say, "If you don't help us, you're going back to Saigon or back to the States with a Section Eight." Instead he comes in and kneels down beside me like some goddamn priest and he says, "I know this is painful, Mary, but I'm sure you can understand."

I say, "Get the hell out of here, motherfucker."

It's like he hasn't heard. He says, "It would help us to know the details of any dream you had last night, Mary."

"You'll let him die anyway," I say.

"I'm sorry, Mary," he says, "but he's already dead. We've received word on one confirmed KIA in Echo Team. All we're interested in is the details of the dream and an approximate time, Mary." He hesitates. "I think he would want you to tell us. I think he would want to feel that it was not in vain, don't you."

He stands up at last.

"I'm going to leave some paper and writing utensils for you. I can understand what you're going through, more than you might imagine, Mary, and I believe that if you give it some thought—if you think about men like Steve and what your dreams could mean to them—you will write down the details of your dream last night."

I scream something at him. When he's gone I cry for a while. Then I go ahead and write down what he wants. I don't know what else to do.

I don't go to the mess. Bucannan has food brought to my bunker but I don't eat it.

I ask the Green Beanie medic where Steve is. Is he back yet? He says he can't tell me. I ask him to send a message to Steve for me. He says he can't do that. I tell him he's a straight-leg ass-kisser and ought to have his jump wings shoved, but this doesn't faze him at all. Any other place, I say, you'd be what you were supposed to be—Special Forces and a damn good medic—but Bucannon's got you, doesn't he. He doesn't say a thing.

I stay awake all that night. I ask for coffee and I get it. I bum more coffee off two sentries and drink that, too. I can't believe he's letting me have it. Steve's team is going to be back soon, I tell myself—they're a strike force, not a Lurp—and if I don't sleep, I can't dream.

I do it again the next night and it's easier. I can't believe it's this easy. I keep moving around. I get coffee and I find this sentry who likes to play poker and we play all night. I tell him I'm a talent and will know if someone's trying to come through the wire on us, sapper or whatever,

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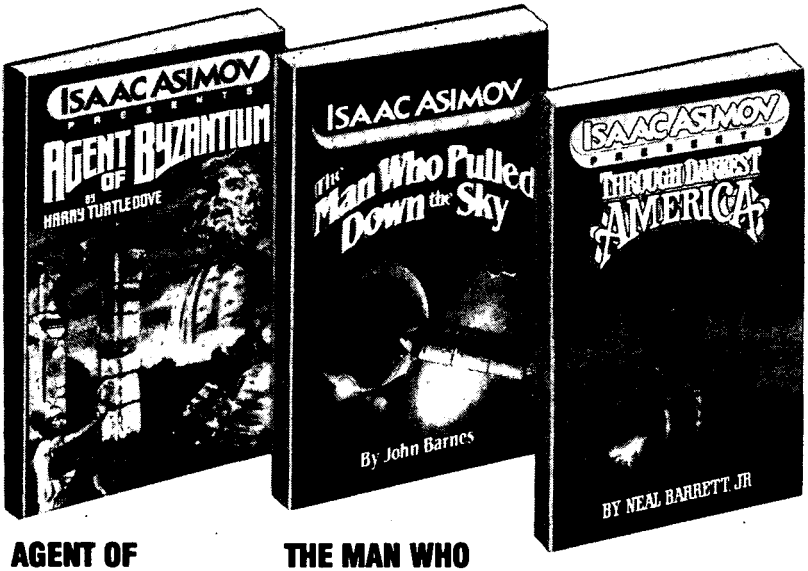

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so we can play cards and not worry. He's pure new-guy and he believes me.

Steve'll be back tomorrow, I tell myself. I'm starting to see things and I'm not thinking clearly, but I'm not going to crash. I'm not going to crash until Steve is back. I'm not going to dream about Steve.

At about 0700 hours the next morning we get mortared. The slicks inside the perimeter start revving up, the Skycrane starts hooking its cats and Rome plows, and the whole camp starts to dust off. I hear radios, more slicks and Skycranes being called in. If the NVA had a battalion, they'd be overrunning us, I tell myself, so it's got to be a lot less—company, platoon—and they're just harassing us, but word has come down from somebody that we're supposed to move.

Mortars are whistling in and someone to one side of me says "Incoming—fuck it!" Then I hear this other sound. It's like flies but real loud. It's like this weird whispering. It's a goddamn flechette round, I realize, spraying stuff, and I don't understand. I can hear it, but it's like a memory, a flashback. Everybody's running around me and I'm just standing there and someone's screaming. It's me screaming. I've got flechettes all through me—my chest, my face. I'm torn to pieces. I'm dying. But I'm running toward the slick, the one that's right over there, ready to dust off. Someone's calling to me, screaming at me, and I'm running, but I'm not. I'm on the ground. I'm on the jungle floor with these flechettes in me and I've got a name, a nickname, Kicker, and I'm thinking of a town in Wyoming, near the Montana border, where everybody rides pickup trucks with shotgun racks and waves to everybody else, I grew up there, there's a rodeo every spring with a county fair and I'm thinking about a girl with braids, I'm thinking how I'm going to die here in the middle of this jungle, how we're on some recondo that no one cares about, how Charlie doesn't have flechette rounds, how Bucannon never makes mistakes.

I'm running and screaming and when I get to the slick the Green Beanie medic grabs me, two other guys grab me and haul me in. I look up. It's Bucannon's slick. He's on the radio. I'm lying on a pile of files right beside him and we're up over the jungle now, we're taking the camp somewhere else, where it can start up all over again.

I look at Bucannon. I think he's going to turn any minute and say, "Which ones, Mary? Which ones died from the flechette?" He doesn't.

I look down and see he's put some paper and three pencils beside me on the floor. I can't stand it. I start crying.

I sleep maybe for twenty minutes and have two dreams. Two other guys died out there somewhere with flechettes in them. Two more guys on Steve's team died and I didn't even meet them.

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I look up. Bucannon's smiling at me.

"It happened, didn't it, Mary?" he says gently. "It happened in the daylight this time, didn't it?"

At the new camp I stayed awake another night, but it was hard and it didn't make any difference. It probably made it worse. It happened three more times the next day and all sorts of guys saw me. I knew someone would tell Steve. I knew Steve's team was still out there—Echo hadn't come in when the rocketing started—but that he was okay. I'm lying on the ground screaming and crying with shrapnel going through me, my legs are gone, my left eyeball is hanging out on my cheek, and there are pieces of me all over the guy next to me, but I'm not Steve, and that's what matters.

The third time, an AK round goes through my neck so I can't even scream. I fall down and can't get up. Someone kneels down next to me and I think it's Bucannon and I try to hit him. I'm trying to scream even though I can't, but it's not Bucannon, it's one of the guys who was sitting with Steve in the mess. They're back, they're back, I think to myself, but I'm trying to tell this guy that I'm dying, that there's this medic somewhere out there under a beautiful rubber tree who's trying to pull me through, but I'm not going to make it, I'm going to die on him, and he's going to remember it his whole life, wake up in the night crying years later and his wife won't understand.

I want to say, "Tell Steve I've got to get out of here," but I can't. My throat's gone. I'm going out under some rubber tree a hundred klicks away in the middle of Laos, where we're not supposed to be, and I can't say a thing.

This guy who shared his ham-and-motherfuckers with me in the mess, this guy is looking down on me and I think, Oh my God, I'm going to dream about him some night, some day, I'm going to dream about him and because I do he's going to die.

He doesn't say a thing.

He's the one that comes to get me in my hooch two days later when they try to bust me out.

They give me something pretty strong. By the time they come I'm getting the waking dreams, sure, but I'm not screaming anymore. I'm here but I'm not. I'm all these other places, I'm walking into an Arclight, B-52 bombers, my ears are bleeding, I'm the closest man when a big Chinese claymore goes off, my arm's hanging by a string, I'm dying in all these other places and I don't even know I've taken their pills. I'm like a doll when Steve and this guy and three others come, and the guards let them. I'm smiling like an idiot and saying, "Thank you very much,"

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something stupid some USO type would say, and I've got someone holding me up so I don't fall on my face.

There's this Jolly Green Giant out in front of us. It's dawn and everything's beautiful and this chopper is gorgeous. It's Air Force. It's crazy. There are these guys I've never seen before. They've got black berets and they're neat and clean, and they're not Army. I think, Air Commandos! I'm giggling. They're Air Force. They're dandies. They're going to save the day like John Wayne at Iwo Jima. I feel a bullet go through my arm, then another through my leg, and the back of my head blows off, but I don't scream. I just feel the feelings, the ones you feel right before you die—but I don't scream. The Air Force is going to save me. That's funny. I tell myself how Steve had friends in the Air Commandos and how they took him around once in-country for a whole damn week, AWOL, yeah, but maybe it isn't true, maybe I'm dreaming it. I'm still giggling. I'm still saying, "Thank you very much."

We're out maybe fifty klicks and I don't know where we're heading. I don't care. Even if I cared I wouldn't know how far out "safe" was. I hear Steve's voice in the cockpit and a bunch of guys are laughing, so I think *safe*. They've busted me out because Steve cares and now we're *safe*. I'm still saying "Thank you" and some guy is saying "You're welcome, baby," and people are laughing and that feels good. If they're all laughing, no one got hurt, I know. If they're all laughing, we're safe. Thank you. Than you very much.

Then something starts happening in the cockpit. I can't hear with all the wind. Someone says "Shit." Someone says "Cobra." Someone else says "Jesus Christ what the hell." I look out the roaring doorway and I see two black gunships. They're like nothing I've ever seen before. No one's laughing. I'm saying "Thank you very much" but no one's laughing.

I find out later there was one behind us, one in front, and one above. They were beautiful. They reared up like snakes when they hit you. They had M-134 Miniguns that could put a round on every square centimeter of a football field within seconds. They had fifty-two white phosphorous rockets apiece and Martin-Marietta laser-guided Copperhead howitzer rounds. They had laser designators and Forward-Looking Infrared Sensors. They were nightblack, no insignias of any kind. They were model AH-1G-X and they didn't belong to any regular branch of the military back then. You wouldn't see them until the end of the war.

I remember thinking that there were only two of us with talent on that slick, why couldn't he let us go? Why couldn't he just let us go?

I tried to think of all the things he would do to us, but he didn't do a thing. He didn't have to.

I didn't see Steve for a long time. I went ahead and tried to sleep at

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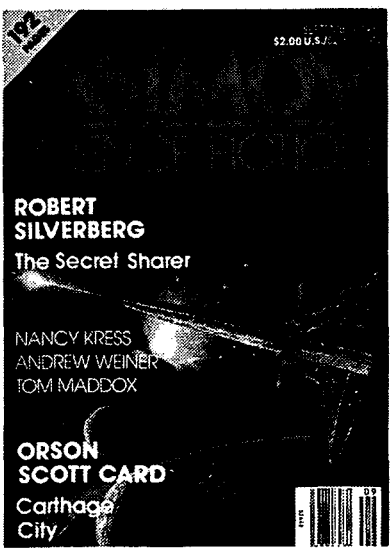

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night because it was better that way. If I was going to have the dreams, it was better that way. It didn't make me so crazy. I wasn't like a doll someone had to hold up.

I went ahead and wrote the dreams down in a little notebook Bucannon gave me, and I talked to him. I showed him I really wanted to understand, how I wanted to help, because it was easier on everybody this way. He didn't act surprised, and I didn't think he would. He'd always known. Maybe he hadn't known about the guys in the black berets, but he'd known that Steve would try it. He'd known I'd stay awake. He'd known the dreams would move to daylight, from "interrupted REM-state," if I stayed awake. And he'd known he'd get us back.

We talked about how my dreams were changing. I was having them much earlier than "events in real time," he said. The same thing had probably been happening back in ER, he said, but I hadn't known it. The talent was getting stronger, he said, though I couldn't control it yet. I didn't need the "focal stimulus," he said, "the physical correlative." I didn't need to meet people to have the dreams.

"When are we going to do it?" I finally said.

He knew what I meant. He said we didn't want to rush into it, how acting prematurely was worse than not understanding it, how the "fixity of the future" was something no one yet understood, and we didn't want to take a chance on stopping the dreams by trying to tamper with the future.

"It won't stop the dreams," I said. "Even if we kept a death from happening, it wouldn't stop the dreams."

He never listened. He wanted them to die. He wanted to take notes on how they died and how my dreams matched their dying, and he wasn't going to call anyone back until he was ready to.

"This isn't war, Mary," he told me one day. "This is a kind of science and it has its own rules. You'll have to trust me, Mary."

He pushed the hair out of my eyes, because I was crying. He wanted to touch me. I know that now.

I tried to get messages out. I tried to figure out who I'd dreamed about. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and try to talk to anybody I could and figure it out. I'd say, "Do you know a guy who's got red hair and is from Alabama?" I'd say, "Do you know an RTO who's short and can't listen to anything except Jefferson Airplane?" Sometimes it would take too long. Sometimes I'd never find out who it was, but if I did, I'd try to get a message out to him. Sometimes he'd already gone out and I'd still try to get someone to send him a message—but that just wasn't done.

I found out later Bucannon got them all. People said yeah, sure, they'd

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see that the message got to the guy, but Bucannon always got them. He told people to say yes when I asked. He knew. He always knew.

I didn't have a dream about Steve and that was the important thing.

When I finally dreamed that Steve died, that it took more guys in uniforms than you'd think possible—with more weapons than you'd think they'd ever need—in a river valley awfully far away, I didn't tell Bucannon about it. I didn't tell him how Steve was twitching on the red earth up North, his body doing its best to dodge the rounds even though there were just too many of them, twitching and twitching, even after his body wasn't alive anymore.

I cried for a while and then stopped. I wanted to feel something but I couldn't.

I didn't ask for pills or booze and I didn't stay awake the next two nights scared about dreaming it again. There was something I needed to do.

I didn't know how long I had. I didn't know whether Steve's team—the one in the dream—had already gone out or not. I didn't know a thing, but I kept thinking about what Bucannon had said, the "fixity," how maybe the future couldn't be changed, how even if Bucannon hadn't intercepted those messages something else would have kept the future the way it was and those guys would have died anyway.

I found the Green Beanie medic who'd taken me to my hooch that first day. I sat down with him in the mess. One of Bucannon's types was watching us but I sat down anyway. I said, "Has Steve Balsam been sent out yet?" And he said, "I'm not supposed to say, Lieutenant. You know that."

"Yes, Captain, I do know that. I also know that because you took me to my little bunker that day I will probably dream about your death before it happens, if it happens here. I also know that if I tell the people running this project about it, they won't do a thing, even though they know how accurate my dreams are, just like they know how accurate Steve Balsam is, and Blakely, and Corigiollo, and the others, but they won't do a thing about it." I waited. He didn't blink. He was listening.

"I'm in a position, Captain, to let someone know when I have a dream about them. Do you understand?"

He stared at me.

"Yes," he said.

I said, "Has Steve Balsam been sent out yet?"

"No, he hasn't."

"Do you know anything about the mission he is about to go out on?"

He didn't say a thing for a moment. Then he said, "Red Dikes."

"I don't understand, Captain."

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He didn't want to have to explain—it made him mad to have to. He looked at the MD type by the door and then he looked back at me.

"You can take out the Red Dikes with a one-K nuclear device, Lieutenant. Everyone knows this. If you do, Hanoi drowns and the North is down. Balsam's team is a twelve-man night insertion beyond the DMZ with special MAC V ordnance from a carrier in the South China Sea. All twelve are talents. Is the picture clear enough, Lieutenant?"

I didn't say a thing. I just looked at him.

Finally I said, "It's a suicide mission, isn't it. The device won't even be real. It's one of Bucannon's ideas—he wants to see how they perform, that's all. They'll never use a nuclear device in Southeast Asia and you know that as well as I do, Captain."

"You never know, Lieutenant."

"Yes, you do." I said it slowly so he would understand.

He looked away.

"When is the team leaving?"

He wouldn't answer anymore. The MD type looked like he was going to walk toward us.

"Captain?" I said.

"Thirty-eight hours. That's what they're saying."

I leaned over.

"Captain," I said. "You know the shape I was in when I got here. I need it again. I need enough of it to get me through a week of this place or I'm not going to make it. You know where to get it. I'll need it tonight."

As I walked by the MD type at the door I wondered how he was going to die, how long it was going to take, and who would do it.

I killed Bucannon the only way I knew how.

I started screaming at first light and when he came to my bunker, I was crying. I told him I'd had a dream about him. I told him I dreamed that his own men, guys in cammies and all of them talents, had killed him, they had killed him because he wasn't using a nurse's dreams to keep their friends alive, because he had my dreams but wasn't doing anything with them, and all their friends were dying.

I looked in his eyes and I told him how scared I was because they killed her too, they killed the nurse who was helping him too.

I told him how big the 9-millimeter holes looked in his fatigues, and how something else was used on his face and stomach, some smaller caliber. I told him how they got him dusted off soon as they could and got him on a sump pump and IV as soon as he hit Saigon, but it just wasn't enough, how he choked to death on his own fluids.

He didn't believe me.

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"Was Lieutenant Balsam there?" he asked.

I said no, he wasn't, trying not to cry. I didn't know why, but he wasn't, I said.

His eyes changed. He was staring at me now.

He said, "When will this happen, Mary?"

I said I didn't know—not for a couple of days at least, but I couldn't be sure, how could I be sure? It felt like four, maybe five, days, but I couldn't be sure. I was crying again.

This is what made him believe me in the end.

He knew it would never happen if Steve were there—but if Steve was gone, if the men waited until Steve was gone?

Steve would be gone in a couple of days and there was no way that this nurse, scared and crying, could know this.

He moved me to his bunker and had someone hang canvas to make a hooch for me inside his. He doubled the guards and changed the guards and doubled them again, but I knew he didn't think it was going to happen until Steve left.

I cried that night. He came to my hooch. He said, "Don't be frightened, Mary. No one's going to hurt you. No one's going to hurt anyone."

But he wasn't sure. He hadn't tried to stop a dream from coming true—even though I'd asked him to—and he didn't know whether he could or not.

I told him I wanted him to hold me, someone to hold me. I told him I wanted him to touch my forehead the way he did, to push my hair back the way he did.

At first he didn't understand, but he did it.

I told him I wanted someone to make love to me tonight, because it hadn't happened in so long, not with Steve, not with anyone. He said he understood and that if he'd only known he could have made things easier on me.

He was quiet. He made sure the flaps on my hooch were tight and he undressed in the dark. I held his hand just like I'd held the hands of the others, back in Cam Ranh Bay. I remembered the dream, the real one where I killed him, how I'd held his hand while he got undressed, just like this.

Even in the dark I could see how pale he was and this was like the dream too. He seemed to glow in the dark even though there wasn't any light. I took off my clothes, too. I told him I wanted to do something special for him. He said fine, but we couldn't make much noise. I said there wouldn't be any noise. I told him to lie down on his stomach on the cot. I sounded excited. I even laughed. I told him it was called "around

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the world" and I liked it best with the man on his stomach. He did what I told him and I kneeled down and lay over him.

I jammed the needle with the morphine into his jugular and when he struggled I held him down with my own weight.

No one came for a long time.

When they did, I was crying and they couldn't get my hand from the needle.

Steve's team wasn't sent. The dreams stopped, just the way Bucannon thought they would. Because I killed a man to keep another alive, the dreams stopped. I tell myself now this was what it was all about. I was supposed to keep someone from dying—that's why the dreams began—and when I did, they could stop, they could finally stop. Bucannon would understand it.

"There is no talent like yours, Mary, that does not operate out of the psychological needs of the individual," he would have said. "You dreamed of death in the hope of stopping it. We both knew that, didn't we. When you killed me to save another, it could end, the dreams could stop, your gift could return to the darkness where it had lain for a million years—so unneeded in civilization, in times of peace, in the humdrum existence of teenagers in Long Beach, California, where fathers believed their daughters to be whores or lesbians if they went to war to keep others alive. Am I right, Mary?"

This is what he would have said.

They could have killed me. They could have taken me out into the jungle and killed me. They could have given me a frontal and put me in a military hospital like the man in '46 who had evidence that Roosevelt knew about the Japanese attack on Pearl. The agency Bucannon had worked for could have sent word down to have me pushed from a chopper on the way back to Saigon, or had me given an overdose, or assigned me to some black op I'd never come back from. They were a lot of things they could have done, and they didn't.

They didn't because of what Steve and the others did. They told them you'll have to kill us all if you kill her or hurt her in any way. They told them you can't send her to jail, you can send her to a hospital but not for long, and you can't fuck with her head, or there will be stories in the press and court trials and a bigger mess than My Lai ever was.

It was seventy-six talents who were saying this, so the agency listened.

Steve told me about it the first time he came. I'm here for a year, that's all. There are ten other women in this wing and we get along—it's like a club. They leave us alone.

Steve comes to see me once a month. He's married—to the same one

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in Merced—and they've got a baby now, but he gets the money to fly down somehow and he tells me she doesn't mind.

He says the world hasn't turned blue since he got back, except maybe twice, real fast, on freeways in central California. He says he hasn't floated out of his body except once, when Cathy was having the baby and it started to come out wrong. It's fading away, he says, and he says it with a laugh, with those big eyelashes and those great shoulders.

Some of the others come, too, to see if I'm okay. Most of them got out as soon as they could. They send me packages and bring me things. We talk about the mess this country is in, and we talk about getting together, right after I get out. I don't know if they mean it. I don't know if we should. I tell Steve it's over, we're back in the Big PX and we don't need it anymore—Bucannon was right—and maybe we shouldn't get together.

He shakes his head. He gives me a look and I give him a look and we both know we should have used the room that night in Cam Ranh Bay, when we had the chance.

"You never know," he says, grinning. "You never know when the baby might wake up."

That's the way he talks these days, now that he's a father.

"You never know when the baby might wake up." ●

****

OVERSEAS CALL

"We dialed a special 900 number... to have one last listen to Pioneer 10 as it passed the orbit of Neptune."
Wall Street Journal 6/14/83

Entering the true night between stars,
four billion miles off your signals are
but strings of digital bleeps.
Musical mutterings in your sleep.
You're now out of earshot;
and suddenly what matters is not
whether we listen or sigh or pine
for the sweeping vistas you
opened—only that someone new
out there is tapping the line?

—Robert Frazier

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Alice Sheldon (1915–1987)

Several years ago, Susan Casper and I accompanied Jeff and Ann Smith on a visit to Alice Sheldon, better known to the SF world by her pseudonym, James Tiptree, Jr. We spent a long afternoon with Alli and her husband, Huntington Sheldon, sharing a light lunch and a few bottles of wine, and, above all, talking, talking intensively, almost compulsively, talking for hours as the day wore on. Even at the time, I sensed that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience... I didn't realize, however, that this would be literally true.

Alice was one of the most fascinating conversationalists I've ever met, brilliant, theatrical, far-ranging, strikingly perceptive, a woman of enormous intelligence, experience, and ability who had had four successful professional careers, any one of which would have been enough for an ordinary human being. And yet, she later told me that after we left that afternoon, she carefully wrapped up a paper napkin I'd been nervously shredding during lunch, labeled the box "Paper napkin shredded by Gardner Dozois during post-lunch conversation at his visit here 27 May '79 with Sue and the Jeff Smiths. Our first meeting. My first with a writer," and carefully filed it away. That odd blend of sophistication and naive enthusiasm was very like Alice. Anyone who ever had any contact with her—the handful who actually met her, the recipients of her eccentric and wonderful letters and postcards, the infrequent telephone calls—knew that they were in contact with a rare and absolutely individual personality, and a unique mind. Of course, you knew *that* if you'd ever read any of her stories, too. Like her, they were unique.

With her desire for a high bit-rate, her concern for societal goals, her passion for the novel and unexpected, her taste for extrapolation, her experimenter's interest in the reactions of people to supernormal stimuli and bizarre situations, her fondness for the apocalyptic, her love of color and sweep and dramatic action, and her preoccupation with the mutability of time and the vastness of space, Alice Sheldon was a natural SF writer. She deeply loved the genre. She once referred to science fiction as "a staggering, towering, glittering mad lay cathedral... built like the old ones by spontaneous volunteers, some bringing one laborious gargoyle, some a load of stone, some engineering a spire. Over years now, over time the thing has grown... To what god? Who knows. Something different from the gods of the other arts. A god that isn't there yet, maybe. An urge saying Up, saying Screw It All. Saying Try." I doubt that she would have been able to realize her particular

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talents as fully in any other genre... and I doubt that there was anywhere else where she would have been able to find readers who would respond so well to what she had to say.

Alice wrote some of the very best SF stories of the seventies: "The Screwfly Solution," "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," "Beam Us Home," "The Women Men Don't See," "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side," "The Man Who Walked Home," "I'm Too Big But I Love to Play," "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?," "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever." Already it's clear that these are stories that will last. They—and a dozen others almost as good—show that Alice Sheldon was simply one of the best short-story writers of our day. Even at her worst, she was never less than entertaining, and there was almost always something quirky and interesting to be found in even the most minor of her stories. Many writers are almost interchangeable, but this was not true of Alice—you could always tell a "Tiptree" story when you saw one, which is why her second pseudonym of "Raccoona Sheldon" was so quickly seen through by so many people. (She once told me she planned to launch a third writing career as "Sylvester Mule"—Sylvester because she loved trees, and Mule because she, too, was sterile—but apparently she realized that it would have been futile; her writing was just too distinctive to be disguised.) I once said that much of the future of SF would belong to "Tiptree," and indeed she has already had an enormous impact on upcoming generations of SF writers. Her footprints are all over cyberpunk turf, for instance, and stories like "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" and "Mother in the Sky with Diamonds" can be seen as directly ancestral to that form.

Hope and despair battled continually in Alice's work, as in her life. She was perfectly capable of telling you that the human race was doomed, and that there'd probably be no life at all left on Earth in twenty years' time. And yet, her stories are full of ordinary little people who battle indomitably on against the most hopeless and overwhelming of odds... people, moreover, who fight against fate without ever abandoning an essential decency and humanity, who never relinquish their capacity for caring even in the face of the blank, relentless, grinding forces of the universe. That she finally gave up on a struggle that there was no way for her to win is not really the important thing. What matters is that she herself never relinquished the capacity for caring no matter what the odds... and that she left for us in her work that same heritage of bravery and compassion, and hope.

She once said, "I'm trying to make contact with the prisoner inside, the voice wearily raised against the never-opening door, the one you hear in the middle of the night. The thing that's alive." And she did.

Good-bye, Alli. Good-bye, Ting. Rest well.

—Gardner Dozois

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The early life of James Abernathy was rife with ominous portent.

His father, a New England customs inspector, had artistic ambitions; he filled his sketchbooks with old Puritan tombstones and new Nantucket whaling-ships. By day, he graded bales of imported tea and calico; during evenings he took James to meetings of his intellectual friends, who would drink port, curse their wives and editors, and give James treacle candy.

James' father vanished while on a sketching expedition to the Great Stone Face of Vermont; nothing was ever found of him but his shoes.

James' mother, widowed with her young son, eventually married a large and hairy man who lived in a crumbling mansion in upstate New York.

At night the family often socialized in the nearby town of Albany. There, James' stepfather would talk politics with his friends in the National Anti-Masonic Party; upstairs, his mother and the other women chatted with prominent dead personalities through spiritualist table-rapping.

Eventually, James' stepfather grew more and more anxious over the plotting of the Masons. The family ceased to circulate in society. The curtains were drawn and the family ordered to maintain a close watch for strangers dressed in black. James' mother grew thin and pale, and often wore nothing but her houserobe for days on end.

One day, James' stepfather read them newspaper accounts of the angel Moroni, who had revealed locally buried tablets of gold that detailed the Biblical history of the Moundbuilder Indians. By the time he reached the end of the article, the stepfather's voice shook and his eyes had grown quite wild. That night, muffled shrieks and frenzied hammerings were heard.

In the morning, young James found his stepfather downstairs by the hearth, still in his dressing gown, sipping teacup after teacup full of brandy and absently bending and straightening the fireside poker.

James offered morning greetings with his usual cordiality. The stepfather's eyes darted frantically under matted brows. James was informed that his mother was on a mission of mercy to a distant family stricken by scarlet fever. The conversation soon passed to a certain upstairs storeroom whose door was now nailed shut. James' stepfather strictly commanded him to avoid this forbidden portal.

Days passed. His mother's absence stretched to weeks. Despite repeated and increasingly strident warnings from his stepfather, James showed no interest whatsoever in the upstairs room. Eventually, deep within the older man's brain, a ticking artery burst from sheer frustration.

During his stepfather's funeral, the family home was struck by ball lightning and burned to the ground. The insurance money, and James' fate, passed into the hands of a distant relative, a muttering, trembling

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man who campaigned against liquor and drank several bottles of Dr. Rifkin's Laudanum Elixir each week.

James was sent to a boarding school run by a fanatical Calvinist deacon. James prospered there, thanks to close study of the scriptures and his equable, reasonable temperament. He grew to adulthood, becoming a tall, studious young man with a calm disposition and a solemn face utterly unmarked by doom.

Two days after his graduation, the deacon and his wife were both found hacked to bits, their half-naked bodies crammed into their one-horse shay. James stayed long enough to console the couple's spinster daughter, who sat dry-eyed in her rocking chair, methodically ripping a handkerchief to shreds.

James then took himself to New York City for higher education.

It was there that James Abernathy found the little shop that sold magic.

James stepped into this unmarked shop on impulse, driven inside by muffled screams of agony from the dentist's across the street.

The shop's dim interior smelled of burning whale-oil and hot lantern-brass. Deep wooden shelves, shrouded in cobwebs, lined the walls. Here and there, yellowing political broadsides requested military help for the rebel Texans. James set his divinity texts on an apothecary cabinet, where a band of stuffed, lacquered frogs brandished tiny trumpets and guitars. The proprietor appeared from behind a red curtain. "May I help the young master?" he said, rubbing his hands. He was a small, spry Irishman. His ears rose to points lightly shrouded in hair; he wore bifocal spectacles and brass-buckled shoes.

"I rather fancy that fantod under the bell-jar," said James, pointing.

"I'll wager we can do much better for a young man like yourself," said the proprietor with a leer. "So fresh, so full of life."

James puffed the thick dust of long neglect from the fantod jar. "Is business all it might be, these days?"

"We have a rather specialized clientele," said the other, and he introduced himself. His name was Mr. O'Beronne, and he had recently fled his country's devastating potato famine. James shook Mr. O'Beronne's small, papery hand.

"You'll be wanting a love-potion," said Mr. O'Beronne with a shrewd look. "Fellows of your age generally do."

James shrugged. "Not really, no."

"Is it budget troubles, then? I might interest you in an ever-filled purse." The old man skipped from behind the counter and hefted a large bear-skin cape.

"Money?" said James with only distant interest.

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"Fame then. We have magic brushes—or if you prefer newfangled scientific arts, we have a camera that once belonged to Montavarde himself."

"No, no," said James, looking restless. "Can you quote me a price on this fantod?" He studied the fantod critically. It was not in very good condition.

"We can restore youth," said Mr. O'Beronne in sudden desperation.

"Do tell," said James, straightening.

"We have a shipment of Dr Heidegger's Patent Youthing Waters," said Mr. O'Beronne. He tugged a quagga hide from a nearby brassbound chest, and dug out a square glass bottle. He uncorked it. The waters fizzed lightly and the smell of May filled the room. "One bottle imbibed," said Mr. O'Beronne, "restores a condition of blushing youth to man or beast."

"Is that a fact," said James, his brows knitting in thought. "How many teaspoons per bottle?"

"I've no idea," Mr. O'Beronne admitted. "Never measured it by the spoon. Mind you, this is an old folks' item. Fellows of your age usually go for the love potions."

"How much for a bottle?" said James.

"It is a bit steep," said Mr. O'Beronne grudgingly. "The price is everything you possess."

"Seems reasonable," said James. "How much for two bottles?"

Mr. O'Beronne stared. "Don't get ahead of yourself, young man." He recorked the bottle carefully. "You've yet to give me all you possess, mind."

"How do I know you'll still have the waters, when I need more?" James said.

Mr. O'Beronne's eyes shifted uneasily behind his bifocals. "You let me worry about that." He leered, but without the same conviction he had shown earlier. "I won't be shutting up this shop—not when there are people of your sort about."

"Fair enough," said James, and they shook hands on the bargain. James returned two days later, having sold everything he owned. He handed over a small bag of gold specie and a bank draft conveying the slender remaining funds of his patrimony. He departed with the clothes on his back and the bottle.

Twenty years passed.

The United States suffered civil war. Hundreds of thousands of men were shot, blown up with mines or artillery, or perished miserably in septic army camps. In the streets of New York, hundreds of anti-draft rioters were mown down with grapeshot, and the cobbled street before the little magic shop was strewn with reeking dead. At last, after stub-

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born resistance and untold agonies, the Confederacy was defeated. The war became history.

James Abernathy returned.

"I've been in California," he announced to the astonished Mr. O'Beronne. James was healthily tanned and wore a velvet cloak, spurred boots and a silver sombrero. He sported a large gold turnip-watch and his fingers gleamed with gems.

"You struck it rich in the gold fields," Mr. O'Beronne surmised.

"Actually, no," said James. "I've been in the grocery business. In Sacramento. One can sell a dozen eggs there for almost their weight in gold dust, you know." He smiled and gestured at his elaborate clothes. "I did pretty well, but I don't usually dress this extravagantly. You see, I'm wearing my entire worldly wealth. I thought it would make our transaction simpler." He produced the empty bottle.

"That's very far-sighted of you," said Mr. O'Beronne. He examined James critically, as if looking for hairline psychic cracks or signs of moral corruption. "You don't seem to have aged a day."

"Oh, that's not quite so," said James. "I was twenty when I first came here; now I easily look twenty-one, even twenty-two." He put the bottle on the counter. "You'll be interested to know there were twenty teaspoons exactly."

"You didn't spill any?"

"Oh, no," said James, smiling at the thought. "I've only opened it once a year."

"It didn't occur to you to take two teaspoons, say? Or empty the bottle at a draught?"

"Now what would be the use of that?" said James. He began stripping off his rings and dropping them on the counter with light tinkling sounds. "You did keep the Youthing Waters in stock, I presume."

"A bargain's a bargain," said Mr. O'Beronne grudgingly. He produced another bottle. James left barefoot, wearing only shirt and pants, but carrying his bottle.

The 1870s passed and the nation celebrated its centennial. Railroads stitched the continent. Gaslights were installed in the streets of New York. Buildings taller than any ever seen began to soar, though the magic shop's neighborhood remained obscure.

James Abernathy returned. He now looked at least twenty-four. He passed over the title deeds to several properties in Chicago and departed with another bottle.

Shortly after the turn of the century, James returned again, driving a steam automobile, whistling the theme of the St. Louis Exhibition and stroking his waxed moustache. He signed over the deed to the car, which was a fine one, but Mr. O'Beronne showed little enthusiasm. The old

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Irishman had shrunken with the years, and his tiny hands trembled as he conveyed his goods.

Within the following period, a great war of global empires took place, but America was mostly spared the devastation. The 1920s arrived, and James came laden with a valise crammed with rapidly appreciating stocks and bonds. "You always seem to do rather well for yourself," Mr. O'Beronne observed in a quavering voice.

"Moderation's the key," said James. "That, and a sunny disposition." He looked about the shop with a critical eye. The quality of the junk had declined. Old engine parts lay in reeking grease next to heaps of moldering popular magazines and spools of blackened telephone wire. The exotic hides, packets of spice and amber, ivory tusks handcarved by cannibals, and so forth, had now entirely disappeared. "I hope you don't mind these new bottles," croaked Mr. O'Beronne, handing him one. The bottle had curved sides and a machine-fitted cap of cork and tin.

"Any trouble with supply?" said James delicately.

"You let me worry about that!" said Mr. O'Beronne, lifting his lip with a faint snarl of defiance.

James' next visit came after yet another war, this one of untold and almost unimaginable savagery. Mr. O'Beronne's shop was now crammed with military surplus goods. Bare electric bulbs hung over a realm of rotting khaki and rubber.

James now looked almost thirty. He was a little short by modern American standards, but this was scarcely noticeable. He wore high-waisted pants and a white linen suit with jutting shoulders.

"I don't suppose," muttered Mr. O'Beronne through his false teeth, "that it ever occurs to you to share this? What about wives, sweethearts, children?"

James shrugged. "What about them?"

"You're content to see them grow old and die?"

"I never see them grow all *that* old," James observed. "After all, every twenty years I have to return here and lose everything I own. It's simpler just to begin all over again."

"No human feelings," Mr. O'Beronne muttered bitterly.

"Oh, come now," said James. "After all, I don't see *you* distributing elixir to all and sundry, either."

"But I'm in the magic shop *business*," said Mr. O'Beronne, weakly. "There are certain unwritten rules."

"Oh?" said James, leaning on the counter with the easy patience of a youthful centenarian. "You never mentioned this before. Supernatural law—it must be an interesting field of study."

"Never you mind that," Mr. O'Beronne snapped. "You're a *customer*, and a human being. You mind your business and I'll mind mine."

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"No need to be so touchy," James said. He hesitated. "You know, I have some hot leads in the new plastics industry. I imagine I could make a great deal more money than usual. That is, if you're interested in selling this place." He smiled. "They say an Irishman never forgets the Old Country. You could go back into your old line—pot o' gold, bowl of milk on the doorstep . . . "

"Take your bottle and go," O'Beronne shouted, thrusting it into his hands.

Another two decades passed. James drove up in a Mustang convertible and entered the shop. The place reeked of patchouli incense, and day-glo posters covered the walls. Racks of demented comic books loomed beside tables littered with hookahs and handmade clay pipes.

Mr. O'Beronne dragged himself from behind a hanging beaded curtain. "You again," he croaked.

"Right on," said James, looking around. "I like the way you've kept the place up to date, man. Groovy."

O'Beronne gave him a poisonous glare. "You're a hundred and twenty years old. Hasn't the burden of unnatural life become insupportable?"

James looked at him, puzzled. "Are you kidding?"

"Haven't you learned a lesson about the blessings of mortality? About how it's better not to outlive your own predestined time?"

"Huh?" James said. He shrugged. "I did learn something about material possessions, though . . . Material things only tie a cat down. You can't have the car this time, it's rented." He dug a handstitched leather wallet from his bellbottom jeans. "I have some fake ID and credit cards." He shook them out over the counter.

Mr. O'Beronne stared unbelieving at the meager loot. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Hey, it's all I possess," James said mildly. "I could have bought Xerox at fifteen, back in the '50s. But last time I talked to you, you didn't seem interested. I figured it was like, you know, not the bread that counts, but the spirit of the thing."

Mr. O'Beronne clutched his heart with a liver-spotted hand. "Is this never going to end? Why did I ever leave Europe? They know how to respect a tradition there . . . " He paused, gathering bile. "Look at this place! It's an insult! Call this a magic shop?" He snatched up a fat mushroom-shaped candle and flung it to the floor.

"You're overwrought," James said. "Look, you're the one who said a bargain's a bargain. There's no need for us to go on with this any longer. I can see your heart's not in it. Why not put me in touch with your wholesaler?"

'Never!" O'Beronne swore. "I won't be beaten by some cold-blooded . . . bookkeeper."

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"I never thought of this as a contest," James said with dignity. "Sorry to see you take it that way, man." He picked up his bottle and left.

The allotted time elapsed and James repeated his pilgrimage to the magic shop. The neighborhood had declined. Women in spandex and net hose lurked on the pavement, watched from the corner by men in broad-brimmed hats and slick polished shoes. James carefully locked the doors of his BMW.

The magic shop's once-curtained windows had been painted over in black. A neon sign above the door read ADULT PEEP 25¢.

Inside, the shop's cluttered floorspace had been cleared. Shrink-wrapped magazines lined the walls, their fleshy covers glaring under the bluish corpse-light of overhead fluorescents. The old counter had been replaced by a long glass-fronted cabinet displaying knotted whips and flavored lubricants. The bare floor clung stickily to the soles of James' Gucci shoes.

A young man emerged from behind a curtain. He was tall and bony, with a small neatly trimmed moustache. His smooth skin had a waxy, subterranean look. He gestured fluidly. "Peeps in the back," he said in a high voice, not meeting James' eyes. "You gotta buy tokens. Three bucks."

"I beg your pardon?" James said.

"Three bucks, man!"

"Oh." James produced the money. The man handed over a dozen plastic tokens and vanished at once behind the curtains.

"Excuse me?" James said. No answer. "Hello?"

The peep machines waited in the back of the store, in a series of curtained booths. The vinyl cushions inside smelled of sweat and butyl nitrate. James inserted a token and watched.

He then moved to the other machines and examined them as well. He returned to the front of the shop. The shopkeeper sat on a stool, ripping the covers from unsold magazines and watching a small television under the counter.

"Those films," James said. "That was Charlie Chaplin. And Douglas Fairbanks. And Gloria Swanson. . . . "

The man looked up, smoothing his hair. "Yeah, so? You don't like silent films?"

James paused. "I can't believe Charlie Chaplin did porn."

"I hate to spoil a magic trick," the shopkeeper said, yawning. "But they're genuine peeps, pal. You ever hear of Hearst Mansion? San Simeon? Old Hearst, he liked filming his Hollywood guests on the sly. All the bedrooms had spyholes."

"Oh," James said. "I see. Ah, is Mr. O'Beronne in?"

The man showed interest for the first time. "You know the old guy?

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I don't get many nowadays who knew the old guy. His clientele had pretty special tastes, I hear."

James nodded. "He should be holding a bottle for me."

"Well, I'll check in the back. Maybe he's awake." The shopkeeper vanished again. He reappeared minutes later with a brownish vial. "Got some love potion here."

James shook his head. "Sorry, that's not it."

"It's the real stuff, man! Works like you wouldn't believe!" The shopkeeper was puzzled. "You young guys are usually into love potions. Well, I guess I'll have to rouse the old guy for you. Though I kind of hate to disturb him."

Long minutes passed, with distant rustling and squeaking. Finally the shopkeeper backed through the curtains, tugging a wheelchair. Mr. O'Beronne sat within it, wrapped in bandages, his wrinkled head shrouded in a dirty nightcap. "Oh," he said at last. "So it's you again."

"Yes, I've returned for my—"

"I know, I know." Mr. O'Beronne stirred fitfully on his cushions. "I see you've met my . . . associate. Mr. Ferry."

"I kind of manage the place, these days," said Mr. Ferry. He winked at James, behind Mr. O'Beronne's back.

"I'm James Abernathy," James said. He offered his hand.

Ferry folded his arms warily. "Sorry, I never do that."

O'Beronne cackled feebly and broke into a fit of coughing. "Well, my boy," he said at last, "I was hoping I'd last long enough to see you one more time . . . Mr. Ferry! There's a crate, in the back, under those filthy movie posters of yours . . . "

"Sure, sure," Ferry said indulgently. He left.

"Let me look at you," said O'Beronne. His eyes, in their dry, leaden sockets, had grown quite lizardlike. "Well, what do you think of the place? Be frank."

"It's looked better," James said. "So have you."

"But so has the world, eh?" O'Beronne said. "He does bang-up business, young Ferry. You should see him manage the books. . . . " He waved one hand, its tiny knuckles warped with arthritis. "It's such a blessing, not to have to care any more."

Ferry reappeared, lugging a wooden crate, crammed with dusty six-packs of pop-top aluminum cans. He set it gently on the counter.

Every can held Youthing Water. "Thanks," James said, his eyes widening. He lifted one pack reverently, and tugged at a can.

"Don't," O'Beronne said. "This is for you, all of it. Enjoy it, son. I hope you're satisfied."

James lowered the cans, slowly. "What about our arrangement?"

O'Beronne's eyes fell, in an ecstasy of humiliation. "I humbly apologize.

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But I simply can't keep up our bargain any longer. I don't have the strength, you see. So this is yours now. It's all I could find."

"Yeah, this must be pretty much the last of it," nodded Ferry, inspecting his nails. "It hasn't moved well for some time—I figure the bottling plant shut up shop."

"So many cans, though . . . " James said thoughtfully. He produced his wallet. "I brought a nice car for you, outside . . . "

"None of that matters now," said Mr. O'Beronne. "Keep all of it, just consider it my forfeit." His voice fell. "I never thought it would come to this, but you've beaten me, I admit it. I'm done in." His head sagged limply.

Mr. Ferry took the wheelchair's handles. "He's tired now," he said soothingly. "I'll just wheel him back out of our way, here . . . " He held the curtains back and shoved the chair through with his foot. He turned to James. "You can take that case and let yourself out. Nice doing business—goodbye." He nodded briskly.

"Goodbye, sir!" James called. No answer.

James hauled the case outside to his car, and set it in the back seat. Then he sat in front for a while, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

Finally he went back in.

Mr. Ferry had pulled a telephone from beneath his cash register. When he saw James he slammed the headset down. "Forget something, pal?"

"I'm troubled," James said. "I keep wondering . . . what about those unwritten rules?"

The shopkeeper looked at him, surprised. "Aw, the old guy always talked like that. Rules, standards, quality." Mr. Ferry gazed meditatively over his stock, then looked James in the eye. "What *rules,* man?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I was never quite sure," James said. "But I'd like to ask Mr. O'Beronne."

"You've badgered him enough," the shopkeeper said. "Can't you see he's a dying man? You got what you wanted, so scram, hit the road." He folded his arms. James refused to move.

The shopkeeper sighed. "Look, I'm not in this for my health. You want to hang around here, you gotta buy some more tokens."

"I've seen those already," James said. "What else do you sell?"

"Oh, machines not good enough for you, eh?" Mr. Ferry stroked his chin. "Well, it's not strictly in my line, but I might sneak you a gram or two of Señor Buendia's Columbian Real Magic Powder. First taste is free. No? You're a hard man to please, bub."

Ferry sat down, looking bored. "I don't see why I should change my stock, just because you're so picky. A smart operator like you, you ought

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to have bigger fish to fry than a little magic shop. Maybe you just don't belong here, pal."

"No, I always liked this place," James said. "I used to, anyway . . . I even wanted to own it myself."

Ferry tittered. "You? Gimme a break." His face hardened. "If you don't like the way I run things, take a hike."

"No, no, I'm sure I can find something here," James said quickly. He pointed at random to a thick hard-bound book, at the bottom of a stack, below the counter. "Let me try that."

Mr. Ferry shrugged with bad grace and fetched it out. "You'll like this," he said unconvincingly. "Marilyn Monroe and Jack Kennedy at a private beachhouse."

James leafed through the glossy pages. "How much?"

"You want it?" said the shopkeeper. He examined the binding and set it back down. "Okay, fifty bucks."

"Just cash?" James said, surprised. "Nothing magical?"

"Cash *is* magical, pal." The shopkeeper shrugged. "Okay, forty bucks and you have to kiss a dog on the lips."

"I'll pay the fifty," James said. He pulled out his wallet. "Whoops!" He fumbled, and it dropped over the far side of the counter.

Mr. Ferry lunged for it. As he rose again, James slammed the heavy book into his head. The shopkeeper fell with a groan.

James vaulted over the counter and shoved the curtains aside. He grabbed the wheelchair and hauled it out. The wheels thumped twice over Ferry's outstretched legs. Jostled, O'Beronne woke with a screech.

James pulled him toward the blacked-out windows. "Old man," he panted. "How long has it been since you had some fresh air?" He kicked open the door.

"No!" O'Beronne yelped. He shielded his eyes with both hands. "I have to stay inside here! That's the rules!" James wheeled him out onto the pavement. As sunlight hit him, O'Beronne howled in fear and squirmed wildly. Gouts of dust puffed from his cushions and his bandages flapped. James yanked open the car door, lifted O'Beronne bodily, and dropped him into the passenger seat. "You can't do this!" O'Beronne screamed, his nightcap flying off. "I belong behind walls, I can't go into the world . . ."

James slammed the door. He ran around and slid behind the wheel. "It's dangerous out here," O'Beronne whimpered as the engine roared into life. "I was safe in there . . ."

James stamped the accelerator. The car laid rubber. He glanced behind him in the rear-view mirror, and saw an audience of laughing, whooping hookers. "Where are we going?" O'Beronne said meekly.

James floored it through a yellow light. He reached into the back seat

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one-handed and yanked a can from its six-pack. "Where was this bottling plant?"

O'Beronne blinked doubtfully. "It's been so long . . . Florida, I think."

"Florida sounds good. Sunlight, fresh air . . ." James weaved deftly through traffic, cracking the pop-top with his thumb. He knocked back a hefty swig, then gave O'Beronne the can. "Here, old man. Finish it off."

O'Beronne stared at it, licking dry lips. "But I can't. I'm an owner, not a customer. I'm simply not allowed to do this sort of thing. I own that magic shop, I tell you."

James shook his head and laughed.

O'Beronne trembled. He raised the can in both gnarled hands and began chugging thirstily. He paused once to belch, and kept drinking.

The smell of May filled the car.

O'Beronne wiped his mouth and crushed the empty can in his fist. He tossed it over his shoulder.

"There's room back there for those bandages, too," James told him. "Let's hit the highway." ●

GRAVITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN OUR ENEMY

Gravity has always been our enemy.
All our motion and all our building
graceful only by Earth-bound standards.
Now we see our old awkwardness
in the insupportability of those bound to earth.
Generations now know only
the flow of energy from the sun
and the ancient tides of the solar system,

Surely our God drew those clouds
to challenge those awkward people
to break the beauty of the flying bird
by building in the stars,
cities which know no gravity.

—Roger Dutcher
14 November 1986

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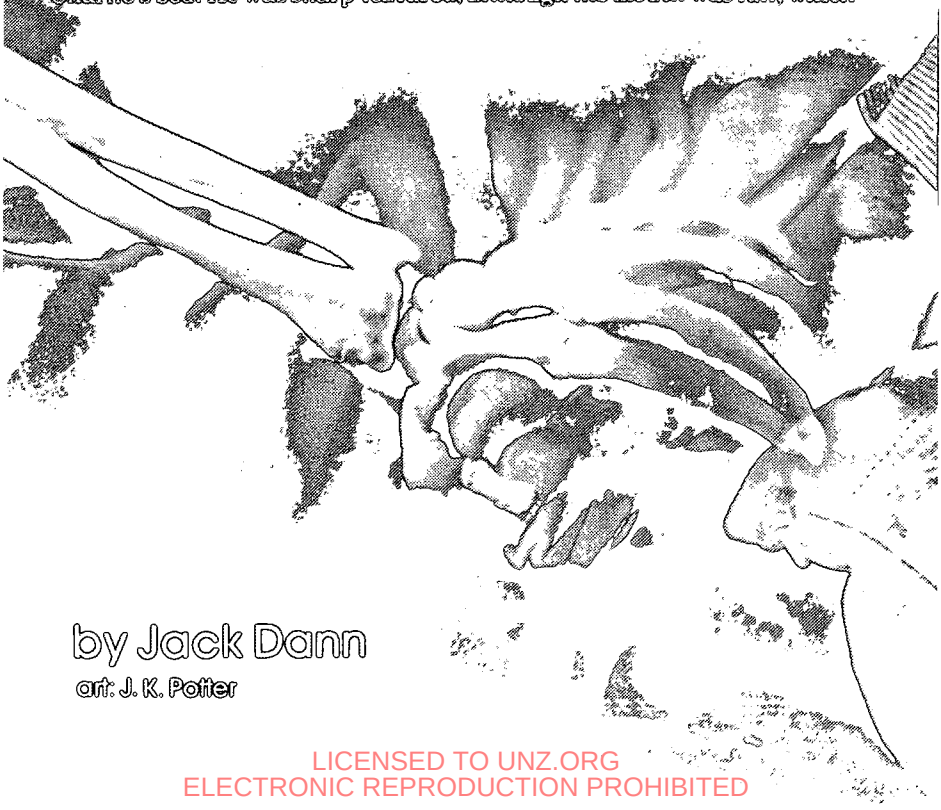
VISITORS

The New York *Times* has called Jack Dann's recent Vietnam anthology, *In the Field of Fire* (coedited with his wife, Jeanne Van Buren Dann), an " . . . important addition and significant contribution to the literature of the 1980s." Mr. Dann is also coeditor (with Gardner Dozois) of Ace Books' popular "Magic Tales" anthology series. The most recent of these books is *Sorcerers!*, and *Demons!* and *Hellhounds!* are both forthcoming.

After Mr. Benjamin died, he came back to Charlie's room for a visit. He was a tall man, taken down to the bone by cancer. His face had a grayish cast; and his thick white hair, of which he had been so obviously proud, had thinned. But he was still handsome even as he stood before Charlie's bed. He was sharp-featured, although his mouth was full, which



by Jack Dann

art: J. K. Potter

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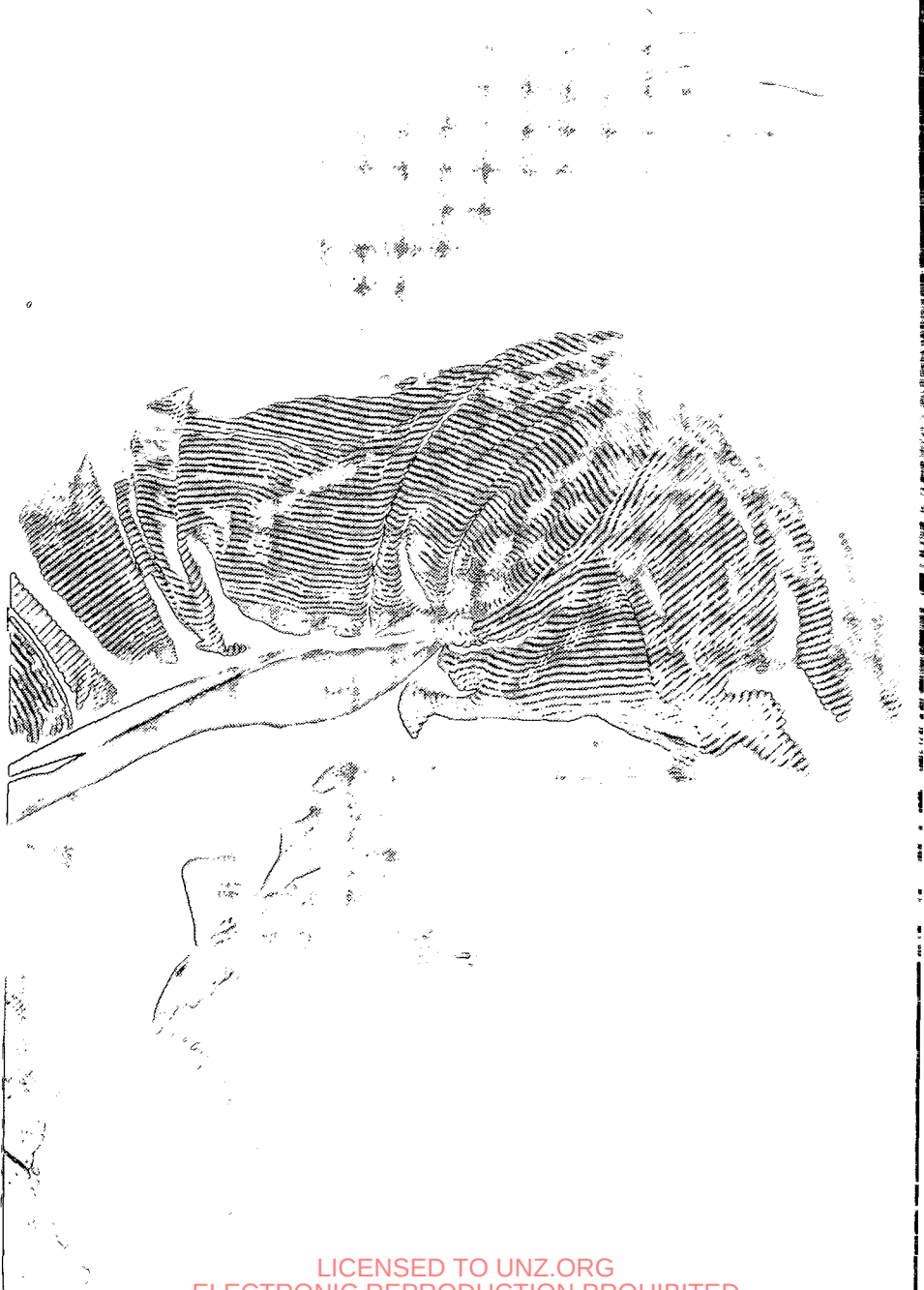

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softened the effect of his piercing, pale blue eyes; he wore white silk pajamas and a turquoise robe, and was as poised and stiff as an ancient emperor.

"They closed all the doors again," Charlie said to Mr. Benjamin—they always closed the doors to the patients' rooms when they had to wheel a corpse through the hallway.

"I guess they did," Mr. Benjamin said, and he sat down in the cushioned chair beside Charlie's bed. He usually came for a visit before bedtime; it was part of his nightly ritual.

But here he was, and it was mid-afternoon.

Sunlight flooded through a tripartite window into the large high-ceilinged room, magnifying the swirling dust motes that filled the room like snow in a crystal Christmas scene paperweight. The slate-gray ceiling above was barrel-vaulted and although cracked and broken and discolored, the plaster was worked into intricate patterns of entwined tendrils. A marble fireplace was closed off with a sheet of metal, and there was an ancient mahogany grandfather clock ticking in the corner. The hospital had once been a manor, built in the eighteen hundreds by the wealthiest man in the state; its style was Irish gothic, and every room contained the doric columns and scrolled foliage that was a trademark of the house.

"I wonder who died?" Charlie asked.

Mr. Benjamin smiled sadly and stretched his long legs out under Charlie's bed.

Charlie was fifteen and had had an erection before Mr. Benjamin came into the room, for he was thinking about the nurses, imagining how they would look undressed. Although Charlie's best friend had been laid, Charlie was still a virgin; but he looked older than he was and had even convinced his best friend that he, too, had popped the cork. He had been feeling a bit better these last few days. He had not even been able to think about sex before; there was only pain and drugs, and even with the drugs he could feel the pain. All the drugs did were let him investigate its shape; Charlie had discovered that pain had shape and color; it was like an animal that lived and moved inside him.

"How are you feeling today?" Mr. Benjamin asked.

"Pretty good," Charlie said, although the pain was returning and he was due for another shot. "How about you?"

Mr. Benjamin laughed. Then he asked, "Where's Rosie?" Rosie was Charlie's private nurse. Charlie's father was well-to-do and had insisted on round-the-clock private nurses for his son. But Charlie didn't want private nurses or a private room; in fact, he would have preferred a regular double-room and a roommate, which would have been much less expensive; and if Charlie had another setback, his roommate would be

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able to call for a nurse for him. Charlie had been deathly ill: he had developed peritonitis from a simple appendectomy, and his stomach was still hugely distended. Drainage tubes were sunk deeply into his incisions, and they smelled putrid. He had lost over thirty pounds.

Charlie seemed to be slipping in and out of a dream; it was just the Demerol working through his system.

"Rosie's off today," he said after a long pause. He had been dreaming of whiteness, but he could hear clearly through the dream. He came fully awake and said, "I love her, but it's such a relief not to have her banging everything around and dropping things to make sure I don't fall asleep. The regular nurses have been in a lot, and I got two backrubs." He grinned at Mr. Benjamin. It was a game he played with Mr. Benjamin: who could win the most points in wooing the nurses. One night, when Charlie had been well enough to walk across the hall and visit Mr. Benjamin, he found him in bed with two nurses. Mr. Benjamin had a grin on his face, as if he had just won the game forevermore. The nurses, of course, were just playing along.

Mr. Benjamin leaned back in the chair. It was a bright, sunny day, and the light hurt Charlie's eyes when he stared out the window for too long. Perhaps it was an effect of the Demerol, but Mr. Benjamin just seemed . . . not quite defined, as if his long fingers and strong face were made out of the same dustmotes that filled the air and the room.

"Is your wife coming over today?" Charlie asked. "It's Wednesday." Charlie was in on Mr. Benjamin's secret: two women came to visit him religiously. His mistress, a beautiful young woman with long red hair, on Tuesdays and Thursdays; and his wife, who wasn't beautiful, but who must have been once, and who was about the same age as Mr. Benjamin, came every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. His friends came to see him on Saturday, but not his women.

"No, not today," Mr. Benjamin said.

"That's too bad."

And just then one of the nurses came into the room. She was one of the old hands, and she said hello to Charlie, fluffed up his pillow, took his temperature, and gave him a shot all the while she talked, but it was small-talk. The nurse ignored Mr. Benjamin, as she tore away the bandages that covered the drainage tubes in Charlie's stomach. Then she pulled out the tubes, which didn't hurt Charlie, and cleaned them. After she had reinserted the tubes—two into the right side of his abdomen, one into the left—and replaced the bandages, she hung another clear plastic bag of saline solution on the metal pole beside the bed and adjusted the rate of fluid that dripped into the vein in Charlie's right wrist.

"Who died?" Charlie asked her, wishing one of the pretty nurses'-aides

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had been sent in, or had at least accompanied her.

She sat down on the bed and rubbed Charlie's legs. He had lost so much weight that they were the size his arms had once been. This nurse was one of Charlie's favorites, even though she was old—she could have been fifty or sixty-five, it was difficult to tell. She had a wide, fleshy face, a small nose, and perfect, capped teeth. "You'll have to know anyway," she said without looking up at him. "It was Mr. Benjamin. I know how close you felt to him, and I'm so very sorry, but as you know he was in a lot of pain. This is the best thing for the poor man, you've got to try to believe that. He's in a happier place now."

Charlie was going to tell her she was crazy, that he was right here, and had a mistress and a wife and an architect job to go back to and that it was all bullshit about a happier place, but he just nodded and turned toward Mr. Benjamin. She made a fuss over Charlie, who was ignoring her, and finally left. "Are you sure you'll be okay?" she asked.

Charlie nodded. His mouth felt dry; the Demerol would soon kick in. "Yeah, I'll be fine." Then, turning back to Mr. Benjamin, he asked, "Are you really dead?"

Mr. Benjamin nodded. "I suppose I am."

"You don't look dead."

"I don't feel dead. My goddamn legs are still aching and itching like hell."

Charlie's face felt numb. "Why are you in here if you're dead?"

"How the hell should I know. There are worse places I can think of. I just got out of bed and walked in here, same way as I always do."

"Are you going to stay?"

"For a while. Do you mind?"

Charlie just shook his head and took comfort, as he always did, in Mr. Benjamin's presence. But then the man in the next room started screaming again, praying to God to relieve him of his pain, begging and whining and whimpering and waking up the other patients.

It was difficult to rest with all that commotion going on.

The Demerol came upon him like a high-tide of anesthesia. It soaked into him and everything in the hospital room turned white, as if the molding and wall panels and ceiling scrollwork and inlaid marble chimneypiece were carved out of purest snow. He dreamed of winter and castles and books he had read when he was a child. He was inside a cloud, his thoughts drifting, linking laterally, as he dreamed of chalk and snow and barium, of whitewash and bleach, of silver and frost and whipped cream, of angels and sand, of girls as white as his Demerol highs, chalky and naked with long white hair and pale lips, long and thin and small breasted, open and wet and cold, cold as snow, cold as his

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icicle erection, cold as his thoughts of glacially slow coitus.

He woke up shivering in a dark room, sweat drying on his goosebumped skin. Gray shadows crawled across the room, a result of traffic on the street below.

Mr. Benjamin was still sitting beside the bed.

"Have you been here all this time?" Charlie asked. It was late. The nurses had turned out the lights in his room, and the hallway was quiet. If he listened carefully and held his breath, he could hear the snoring and moaning of other patients between the tickings of the clock. His mouth was parched, and he reached for the water tumbler. It sat on his nineteen-fifties style nighttable, which also contained the remote control unit that turned the television on and off and also allowed him to buzz the nurse's station. He poured some icewater into a paper cup. "You look more . . . real," Charlie said.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Benjamin asked.

"I dunno, you looked kinda weak before."

"Well, I'm feeling better now. My legs stopped itching, and they only ache a little bit now. I can stand it, at least. How about you?"

"I feel like crap again," Charlie said. "I thought I was getting better." The pain in his stomach was intense and stabbing; it hadn't been this bad in a long time. "And I know that old fat Mrs. Campbell isn't going to give me another shot until I start screaming and moaning like the guy across the hall."

Charlie's night-nurse thought he was becoming too dependent on painkillers.

"He's getting worse," Mr. Benjamin said.

"Who?" Charlie asked.

"The guy across the hall, Mr. Ladd. Rosie told me he's had most of his stomach removed."

"I just wish he would stop crying and begging for the pain to go away. I can't stand it. He makes such a racket. There's something pitiful about it. And he's not the only one who's in pain around here."

"Well, who knows, maybe he can cut a deal," Mr. Benjamin said.

"You're not dead," Charlie said.

Mr. Benjamin shrugged.

"I thought you said you had all kinds of contracts to build new buildings and stuff. You said you wanted to work until you dropped dead, that you wanted to travel and all. And what about Miss Anthony . . . and your wife?"

"It's all gone," Mr. Benjamin said.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"I don't know," he said, surprised. "I don't really feel anything much

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about it. Maybe a little sad. But I guess not even that."

"Tell me what it's like to be dead."

"I don't know. The same as being alive, I would suppose, except my legs feel better."

"You're not dead," Charlie said.

"I'll take your word for it, Charlie."

Charlie became worse during the night. He used the speaker in the nighttable to call Mrs. Campbell for a shot, but she told him he wasn't due for another hour. He tried to argue with her, he kept calling her, but she ignored him. He listened to the clock on the wall and turned this way and that, trying to find a comfortable position. Goddamn her, Charlie thought, and he tried to count himself to sleep. If he could fall asleep for just a little while, it would then be time for his shot.

Goddamn it hurts. . . .

And Mr. Ladd across the hall started screaming and whining and trying to make a deal with God again. Charlie gritted his teeth and tried to pretend that the room was turning white, and that he was numb and frozen, made of blue ice. Ice: the absence of pain.

"Mr. Benjamin, are you still there?" Charlie asked.

But there was no answer.

Finally, it was time for his shot, and Charlie slept, drifting through cold spaces defined by the slow ticking of the clock.

Although it was four in the morning and everyone was asleep, the nurses and orderlies ritually closed the doors, as they always did, when they wheeled a corpse down the hallway.

Charlie was awake and feeling fine when Mr. Benjamin brought Mr. Ladd into the room; the pain was isolated and the metallic taste of the drugs was strong in his mouth. Mr. Ladd appeared nervous. He was in his sixties, and bald. He was thin, emaciated-looking, and his skin was blemished with age-marks.

"Our friend here hasn't quite gotten used to being dead," Mr. Benjamin said to Charlie. "I found him wandering around the hallway. You mind if he stays a while?"

"I dunno," Charlie said, although he didn't want the old man in his room. "What's he going to do here?"

"Same thing you're doing. Same thing I'm doing."

Mr. Ladd didn't even acknowledge Charlie. He looked around the room, his head making quick, jerky motions; then he walked across the room, sat down on the stained cushion of the windowseat, and looked down into the street.

"At least your pain's gone," Mr. Benjamin called to him, but the old

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man just stared out the window, as if he hadn't heard him. "How about you?" Mr. Benjamin asked Charlie.

"I'm okay, I guess," but then someone else came into the room. A middle-aged woman in a blue bathrobe. She exchanged greetings with Mr. Benjamin and walked over to the window. "You know her?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, I sat with her some yesterday and tonight she was real bad. But I guess you can't win. I left Mr. Ladd to be with her. Now they're both here." Mr. Benjamin smiled. "I feel like a goddamned Florence Nightingale."

But Charlie had fallen asleep.

He awoke to bright sunlight. His condition had deteriorated further, for now he had an oxygen tube breathing icy air into one nostril, while in the other was a tube that passed down his esophagus and into his stomach. His private nurse Rosie was in the room, moving about, looking starched and efficient and upset. His mother sat beside the bed, leaning toward him, staring at him intently, as if she could think him well. Her small, delicate face seemed old to him, and her dyed jet-black hair looked as coarse and artificial as a cheap wig. But both his mother and Rosie seemed insubstantial, as if *they* were becoming ghosts. His mother blocked out most of the light coming through the windows, but some of it seemed to pass through her, as if she were a cloud shaped like a woman that was floating across the sun. Her voice, which was usually high and piercing, was like a whisper; and her touch felt dry, like leaves brushing against his skin. He suddenly felt sorry for his mother. She loved him, he supposed, but he felt so removed from her. He probably felt like Mr. Benjamin did when he died. Just a little sad.

Charlie just wished that everyone would leave. He looked toward the light, and saw Mr. Benjamin, Mr. Ladd, and the woman who had walked into his room last night standing near the window. He called for Mr. Benjamin; neither Rosie nor his mother seemed to understand what he was saying.

"Mr. Benjamin?"

His mother said something to Rosie, who also said something to Charlie, but Charlie couldn't understand either of them. Their voices sounded far away; it was like listening to static on the radio, and only being able to make out a word here or there. It was as if Rosie and his mother were becoming ghosts, and the visitors, who were already dead, were gaining substance and reality.

"Yes?" Mr. Benjamin said as he walked over to the bed and stood beside Charlie's mother. "I'm afraid you've had a bit of a setback."

"What are they still doing here?" Charlie asked, meaning Mr. Ladd

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and the woman who had come into his room last night.

"Same thing I am," said Mr. Benjamin.

"Okay, what are *you* doing here?"

"Making sure you won't be alone."

Charlie closed his eyes.

Perhaps his mother sensed the presence of the visitors, too, for she suddenly began to cry.

Charlie's mother stayed for the rest of the day. She talked about Charlie's father, as if nothing was going wrong with their marriage, as if she could simply ignore the other dark haired woman who had come into her husband's life. Charlie knew about Laura, the other woman; but he had learned a lot about such things from watching Mr. Benjamin's wife and mistress come and go every week. He supposed it was just the way adults behaved. He couldn't stand to see his mother hurt, yet he couldn't get angry with his father. He felt somehow neutral about the whole thing.

She sat and talked to Charlie as she drank cup after cup of black coffee. She would nod off to sleep for a few minutes at a time and then awaken with a jolt. At five she took her dinner on a plastic tray beside Charlie's bed. Charlie couldn't eat; he was being fed intravenously. He slept fitfully, cried out in pain, received a shot, and lived in whiteness for a while. When he was on the Demerol, his mother and Rosie would all but disappear, yet he would be able to see Mr. Benjamin and the visitors. But Mr. Benjamin wouldn't talk much to him when his mother or hospital personnel were in the room.

Finally, Rosie's shift was over. Rosie tried to talk Charlie's mother into leaving with her, but it was no use. She insisted on staying. Mrs. Campbell, the night nurse, talked with Charlie's mother for a while, and then left the room, as she always did. Charlie would need a shot soon.

His mother held his hand and kept leaning over him, brushing her face against his, kissing him. She talked, but Charlie could barely hear or feel her.

Charlie came awake with a jolt; it was as if he had fallen out of the bed. He was sweaty and could taste something bitter in his mouth. The drugs were still working, but the pain was returning, gaining strength. It was an animal tearing at his stomach. Only a shot and the numbing chill of white sleep could calm it down . . . for a time.

"Hello," said a young woman standing by the bed beside Mr. Benjamin. She had straight, shoulder-length dark brown hair, a heart-shaped face, blue eyes set a bit too widely apart, a small, upturned nose, and full, but colorless lips. She looked tiny, perhaps five feet one, if that, and seemed very shy.

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"Hello," Charlie replied, surprised. He felt awkward and looked over to Mr. Benjamin, who smiled. It was dark again. He turned toward the spot where his mother had been sitting, but he couldn't tell if she was still there. He could only hear the clock and the sound of leaves rustling that he imagined might be his mother's voice. The room was dimly lit, and there seemed to be a shadow, a slight flutter of movement, around the chair. Except for the visitors, the hospital seemed empty and devoid of doctors, nurses, orderlies, aides, and candystripers. Charlie felt numb and cold. The air in the room was visible . . . was white as cirrus clouds and seemed to radiate its own wan light.

"This is Katherine," Mr. Benjamin said. "She's new here, and a bit disoriented, I think." Katherine seemed to be concentrating on the foot of the bed and avoiding eye contact with Charlie. But Charlie noticed that she didn't seem as real, as corporal, somehow, as Mr. Benjamin. Perhaps she wasn't dead long enough. That would take some time. "I'll step aside and give you a chance to win this time," Mr. Benjamin continued.

Charlie blushed. Mr. Benjamin walked to the other side of the room to be with the other visitors.

"How did you die?" Charlie asked Katherine.

She just shook her head, a slight, quick motion.

"Do you feel all right?" he asked. "Are you scared or anything?"

"I just feel alone," she said in almost a whisper.

"Well, you got Mr. Benjamin," Charlie said.

She smiled sadly. "Yeah, I guess." She sat down on the bed. Her robe was slightly opened and Charlie could see a hint of her cleavage. "Are you dying?" she asked.

That took him by surprise, although as soon as she said it, he realized that it shouldn't have. "I dunno. I've just been sick."

"Do you want to live?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Wouldn't you?"

"It feels kinda the same," she said, "only—"

"Only what?"

"I don't know, it's hard to explain. Just alone, like I said. You seem out of focus, sort of," she said. She touched his hand tentatively, and Charlie could feel only a slight pressure and a cool sensation. Charlie held her hand. It was an impulsive move, but she didn't resist. Her hand felt somehow papery, and Charlie had the feeling that he could press his fingers right through her flesh with but little resistance. She leaned toward him, resting against him. It felt like the cool touch of fresh sheets. She seemed weightless. "Thank you," she whispered.

He curled up against her, put his arm around her waist and rested his hand on her leg. He remembered taking long baths and letting his arms

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float in the water. Although the water would buoy them up, it also felt as if he was straining against gravity. That's what it felt like to touch Katherine.

Charlie wanted this to last; it was perfect. He felt the pain in his stomach, but it was far away. Someone else was groaning under its weight.

They watched visitors file into the room. Each one looking disoriented and out of focus. Each one walking across to the other side, to the window, to be with the others, who began to seem as tangible and fleshy as Charlie.

Charlie tried to ignore them. He pulled the sheets over himself . . . and Katherine. He pressed himself as closely as he could to her, and she allowed him to kiss and fondle her.

As everything turned white, numbed by another shot given to him by a ghost, his nurse, Charlie dreamed that he was making love to Katherine.

It was cool and quiet, a wet dream of death.

At dawn Mr. Benjamin called Charlie to leave. The room was empty; the last of the other visitors had just left without a footfall. Mr. Benjamin looked preternaturally real, as if every line of his face, every feature had been etched into perfect stone. Katherine rose from the bed and stood beside Mr. Benjamin, her robe tightly pulled around her. She, too, looked real and solid, more alive than any of the shadows flitting through the halls and skulking about his room: the nurses and aides and orderlies. Charlie found it difficult to breathe; it was as if he had to suck every breath from a straw.

"Why are you leaving?" Charlie asked, his voice raspy; but his words were glottals and gutturals, sighs and croakings.

"It's time. Are you coming?"

"I can't. I'm sick."

"Just get up. Leave what's in the bed," Mr. Benjamin said impatiently, as if dying was not a terribly important or difficult thing to do.

Katherine reached for his hand, and her flesh was firm and real and strong. "I can see you very clearly now," she said. "Come on."

But someone moved in the chair beside Charlie. A shadow, more of a negative space. Charlie tried to make it out. Into a soft focus came the outlines of a woman, his mother. But she was a wraith. Yet he could make her out, could make out her voice, which sounded as distant as a train lowing through the other side of town. She was talking about his younger brother Stephen and the sunflowers behind the house that had grown over six feet tall. The sunflowers always made Charlie feel sad, for they signaled the end of summer and the beginning of school. He

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could feel the warm, sweaty touch of her hand on his face, touching his forehead, which was the way his mother had always checked his temperature.

"I love you, Charlie," she said, her voice papery. "Everything's going to be all right for all of us. And you're going to get well soon. I promise. . . ."

Katherine's hand slipped away, and then Charlie felt the warm, almost hot, touch of his mother's hand upon his own. She clutched his fingers as if she knew she might be losing him, and in the distance, Charlie could hear that train sound: now the sound of his mother crying. And he remembered the rich and wonderful smells that permeated her tiny kitchen when she was making soup; he could see everything in that room: the radio on the red painted shelves, the china bric-a-brac, the red and black electric cat clock on the wall that had a plastic tail and eyes that moved back and forth; and he remembered his grandmother, who always brought him a gift when she visited; and he could almost hear the voices of his friends, as if they were all passing between classes; he remembered kissing Laurie, his first girlfriend, and how he had tried unsuccessfully to feel her up behind her house near the river; and even with his eyes closed he could clearly see his little brother, who always followed him around like a duck, and his gray-haired, distant father who was always "working"; he remembered the time he and his brother hid near the top of the red carpeted stairs and watched the adults milling around and drinking and laughing and kissing each other at a New Year's Eve party, and how his father had awakened him and his brother at four o'clock in the morning on New Year's day so they could eat eggs and toast and home fries with him and Mom in the kitchen; he remembered going to Atlantic City for two weeks in the summer, the boardwalk hot and crowded and gritty with sand, the girls in bikinis and clogs, their skin tanned and hair sun-bleached; he remembered that his mother always tanned quickly, and she looked so young that everyone thought she was his girlfriend when they went shopping along the boardwalk; and suddenly that time came alive, and he could smell salt water taffy and taste cotton candy and snow cones that would immediately start to melt in the blazing, life-giving sun.

Charlie could feel himself lifting, floating; yet another part of him was solid, fleshy, heavy with blood and bone and memory.

He thought of Katherine, of her coolness, the touch of her pale lips and icy breasts . . . and then his mother came into focus: age-lines, black hair, shadows under frightened hazel eyes—his eyes.

And her touch was as strong as Katherine's.

He floated between them . . . caught.

Soon he would have to decide. ●

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CLASS OF '61

by Neal Barrett, Jr.

Neal Barrett, Jr. most recently appeared in *IAsim* with the offbeat "Highbrow" (July 1987). He returns to our pages with this chilling tale of a partial reunion of the "Class of '61."

art: Bob Walters

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Daniel spent the afternoon hacking weeds and second growth off the runway. Sweating felt reasonably good. Maybe he'd start helping in the garden. Not every day, but now and then. In the sparse shade of mesquite, he watched ants dismember a beetle. He felt they were overrated. Sheer number gave the appearance of organization. A thousand of anything looked efficient. He drank from a Mason jar, and ate the sandwiches Doreen had fixed. The plane appeared at six out of a hard metallic sky, engines high-pitched and out of synch. It circled and drifted in slightly askew, buoyed on distorting waves of heat. The plane was something odd and unexpected, a museum-quality relic the color of slag. It gave him a childish surge of pleasure to see the boxy shape of corrugated iron and know its name. Junkers, Ju 52 trimotor. Milk Duds, seven years old, Movietone News.

The wheels touched down and puffed rubber, engines stopping almost at once. A ladder appeared, and John and Hannah climbed down—Hannah, without hesitation; John, as if the ladder might keep on extending down until the earth swallowed him up. The Junkers revved up and rattled off, lumbering like a goose. Hannah looked good. The years had scarcely touched her. She wore a loose Moroccan robe, slate gray and mixed with the color of some yellow desert fruit. In the backdraft of the engines, the robe defined her figure. Susan Hayward on safari. John looked detached. Lean and awkward in a rumpled black suit. He held a panama hat in both hands, working the brim like beads. His white hair was receding, cut short by someone in a hurry. Hannah took the lead, quick assertive steps through the weeds. Hoppers got out of the way. She grasped the small duffel like a weapon, telegraphing her mood, stopping short of Daniel.

"You asshole," she said, "what *is* this?"

"Hello, Hannah. It's been a long time."

"What the fuck am I doing here, Daniel? I want to know that right now."

"You might not want to show anger," Daniel said. "They're not that close, but they don't like it."

"Oh Jesus." Hannah looked dismayed.

"You've no right to bring us here," John said. Daniel waited but that was it. John still wasn't good at getting mad.

"Let's get going," Daniel said. "I want to be in before dark." He turned and walked toward the pickup across the field.

"I am flat *not* leaving here," Hannah said.

Daniel got in the truck. Hannah's string of curses were lost in a sudden wave of sound. The plane teetered around and gathered speed. The pilot waved at no one in particular. A dark man in a turban. A crazed Azerbaijan, more than happy to be gone.

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* * *

He drove from the airport through empty streets, now and then stealing a glance at Hannah. Still the classic nose, the Nefertiti neck or maybe Lubbock—now strung with copper and silver hammered in the North African fashion. There were white strands in her hair, but not many. Hannah and John didn't speak. Daniel flushed a herd of white-tailed deer. The deer raced behind a Safeway and disappeared. He drove John and Hannah past the college, thinking they'd like to see it. John showed marginal interest. Hannah looked straight ahead. He wound through residential streets into the hilly part of town. Light was beginning to fade. He turned off at the curving gravel drive and stopped almost at once under the trees.

"We walk from here," he said. "I don't take the truck any closer." He was startled by Hannah's look. She seemed on the edge of bolting. "It's okay," he said.

"You just shut up. You just goddamn don't talk to me."

He turned her around, touching her for the first time. "Don't do that, Hannah. You're mad at me, that's fine. Just don't show it *here*."

Hannah didn't answer. She looked angry but subdued. He couldn't guess what John was thinking. The cross on John's chest caught the feeble light. He led them up the road, past hot summer smells, live oak and dust. Cicadas droned in the trees. He sensed a certain thickness in the air. The lake was dark through heavy branches. There were lanterns in the downstairs windows of the house. The house was white, columned, and imposing. Country club out of Tara, close to what Daniel's father had imagined. The paint was peeling badly, gentility gone to pot.

"It's still there," John said, with some wonder. Hannah gave him a look, as if he might be simple-minded. Still, Daniel saw she felt it too, coming back after all these years, and was trying not to show it.

Katie met them at the door, looking kittenish and sly. Doreen came part-way out of the kitchen, holding back, tall and elusive. Daniel made introductions. Hannah let him know that she knew exactly what was going on here.

"Katie'll take lamps up to your rooms," Daniel said. "You can clean up if you like, and we'll have supper."

Hannah stood her ground. "What I want now is a drink. Then I want to talk. Right now. In that order."

John nodded vague agreement.

"All right," Daniel said, "that's fine. I just thought you'd like to rest, get something to eat."

"Don't look wounded," Hannah said. "You don't do it nearly as well as you used to." She smiled sweetly at Katie. "I'll bet you're a comfort to Uncle Dan."

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"I'll bet I am," Katie said.

"Christ. I hope you've got Scotch."

John took the chair by the empty fireplace. Hannah found a bottle and plopped on the sofa. Far right side. Daniel stood by the mantel. Everyone knows their places, he thought. Nothing and everything has changed.

"I know you don't want to be here," he said. "I'm sorry. They want something, They just do it. We've got to go along with that. If something goes wrong, that's not good."

"Not good for you," Hannah said.

"Maybe not good for anyone, Hannah." Daniel downed his drink. "What we've got is this *apparition*. Something like that, I don't know. They've seen it down there, and They don't like it. They want me to get rid of it."

Hannah looked startled. "They've got a *ghost*? You're talking about a spook?"

"Maybe. Whatever it is, They want it out of their burrows."

"I wish you'd left me alone," Hannah said. She looked at John. "You going to just sit there, or what? Well, of course you are. You always did."

"What do you want me to do?" John said.

"You see?" She turned on Daniel. "I know what goes on in your head. You get some crazy idea, and that's it. Well, I don't do that anymore, so you're wasting your time. You can't just call up spirits any time you happen to feel like it. Anyway, I think I was a fake."

"We can talk about it tomorrow," Daniel said.

"This room looks just like it did," John said. His smile seemed out of place. He stood and fingered the spines of books.

"I hope I'm dreaming all this," Hannah said.

"John looks the same. You look good, Hannah. You haven't changed a lot."

"Oh, that's *real* nice," Hannah said.

"I didn't mean any offense."

"You never did. That's what makes you such a son of a bitch, Daniel. Christ. I haven't had good whiskey in years." She looked unsteady. John was simply wandering around.

"You've had a long trip," Daniel said. "Be a good idea to get some rest."

"Uh-huh." Hannah looked sly and slightly fierce. "Don't want to keep your chippies waiting."

"All right, now."

"All right, now," Hannah mocked.

John came over and helped her to her feet. Hannah didn't resist.

"I don't have to tell you to stay inside," Daniel said.

"You're interfering with our lives," John said. It seemed another conversation entirely. "I feel you're assuming a lot."

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"I'm sorry."

"I'm going to pray for you, I think."

"It couldn't hurt."

"You talk to Jesus," Hannah said, "you tell Him I don't need this shit. You tell Him that."

He thought about Hannah and John. He counted years in his head. It seemed to be twenty-seven. It didn't seem that long . . . and it did. Hannah and John and Daniel, musketeers, flaunting their friendship, reminding each other daily how close they were. And then Daniel and Hannah taking the friendship a big step further, John shyly backing off and accepting. They invented threesome tennis, roared through the hill country in Daniel's MG, or rushed down to Houston for a party. Daniel played at architecture; Hannah made a brief stab at English. John took every philosophy course he could find. Wore his Nietzsche shirt every day. This was before he startled the other two by announcing, out of the blue, that he'd found a higher calling than German thinkers. All that long and steamy summer, before a senior year that never came. Lovemaking that John always pretended not to hear, just as he pretended not to see Hannah sleek as an otter in the lake, and Daniel knowing he did, and wondering what God could possibly have that Hannah didn't. And Hannah's famous seances, every Saturday night. John scoffing, during his philosophical phase, disapproving later for reasons at the other end of the spectrum.

And then it was over, although it seemed as if they'd hardly started on their lives. Something came from somewhere, quietly and with no fuss at all. No starships or death-rays, no sense of the dramatic. They simply *came*. Nothing changed. Everything was exactly as it had been. Except for the people. Most of the people were simply *gone*. There one minute, and not the next. And nearly thirty years later, neither Daniel nor anyone else knew where all the people had gone, or what *They* were. He knew that They'd apparently come to stay. He knew that there weren't many of Them. That not many was enough. He knew that the ones that lived close by his house, under the earth, had a spook, and wanted it gone.

Daniel watched the curtains billow and heard the clock downstairs, heard frogs at the lake and felt Doreen's sweet breath on his shoulder. The young slept soundly. Nothing seemed to wake them. He pulled on his shorts, and opened the wide French doors, stepped out on the balcony that circled the upper floors, and saw that John was already there. The night was half gone, and he was still fully dressed.

"You shouldn't be out here," Daniel said.

"Couldn't sleep. Did you think I could?"

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"I'd feel a lot better if you just cussed me out good, John."

"Would that help?"

"I hope this isn't a sermon."

"I can't get over this. It all looks the same."

"It's not," Daniel said.

Clouds whipped over the moon. The grounds, the dark lawn that swept up from the house to the terraced hill, wavered and seemed fluid. His father had built a colonnaded temple atop the hill during a brief Ionic fit. A copy of something-or-other in Greece, Daniel couldn't remember what. It seemed chalky and tenuous among the trees.

"That was my favorite place," John said. "It looks best at night. Sort of Maxfield Parrish. Very unChristian, I suppose." He didn't look at Daniel. "Where are They? I mean, do you know?"

"No," Daniel said. He didn't want to talk about this. "The burrows are all over. Deep, I guess."

"They don't stay down there all the time."

Daniel didn't answer.

"I don't think I can handle this," John said. His voice seemed oddly detached.

"Don't think about Them."

"We've got a hundred and seven people in Cardiff. It's a nice little place. Maybe a hundred more up at Glasgow. There's a burrow at York, but They don't seem to bother anyone. Hannah says there are eighty-two people in Morocco. A few more in Kenya. Nobody's in Europe, I know that."

"I don't think it does any good to count," Daniel said.

"Those girls you have here. . . ."

"There's a settlement in Fort Worth. Pretty big one. They come from there. Why don't you get some sleep, John? There's a bottle of good brandy downstairs."

"Those young people being here is a sin, Daniel."

"They don't mind sinning that much," Daniel said. "You think about that brandy."

"I wonder what They *did* with everyone?" John said. "I wonder where everybody is?" He looked at Daniel, but didn't appear to see him. He seemed to wander accidentally back to his room.

Daniel heard Doreen sigh in her sleep. The temple seemed misty, indistinct. A slight hot breeze, and last year's leaves rattling across marble steps. Trees formed ragged shadow, the night seemed tangible and immense. Daniel went back to bed. If anything was out there, he didn't want to know it.

Hannah looked fresh, ready to go ten rounds with Daniel. John looked

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wasted, as if Hannah's hangover had somehow found the wrong room. Doreen stayed in the kitchen. Katie served breakfast and Hannah looked her over. Katie met her eyes, confirming mischief. No way Hannah could put her down, and Hannah began to see this and left her alone. She went through venison steak and hotcakes and tea. John picked at his food, and Daniel said nothing about it.

"I'm not saying I can or I can't," Hannah said, picking up the conversation from the night before. "It'll have to be at night. I guess in the library, the way we used to do it." She winked at John. "I'll flush it out, you toss wine and cookies on its tail."

"I guess you think that's funny," John said. He crossed himself, a halfhearted gesture. He spoke to Daniel but looked at Hannah. "I don't want any part of this. You've got your medium. You don't need a priest."

"I don't know exactly what I need," Daniel said.

"The Church doesn't recognize spiritualism," John said. "You ought to know that."

What church? Daniel wondered. John might be the only priest in the world. John would be aware of that too, but it wasn't a point Daniel cared to make.

"I'm glad you're willing to try," Daniel said. "I appreciate it, Hannah."

"Fuck appreciation," Hannah said. "I want to get *out* of this place."

John stayed in his room, maybe storing up grace. Daniel showed Doreen how he wanted the fence done to keep deer out of the lettuce. He looked for Hannah, and found her past the house near the lake. She had trimmed down jeans to make shorts. Moroccan sun had browned her; twenty-seven years didn't seem that long ago. She heard him coming but didn't face him. The tennis courts were flat desolation, veined with tufts of grass hard as rope. Trumpet vines covered the high backdrop fence, a sagging plane of green.

"I wasn't ever much good," Daniel said. "It was mostly your game. You and John."

Hannah almost smiled, but thought better of it. "I didn't think I could get out of the house. I've never been this close to where They stay. I'm scared out of my socks, you want to know. I guess you've seen Them; I don't know if I want to ask that or not."

"Daytime's all right," he told her. "Stay down here and around the house. Don't go up the hill."

She looked at him, a question put quickly aside. He counted years in her face, the planes of her cheeks. If drink had done damage, he couldn't see it. She wasn't nineteen anymore, but her eyes were clear as crystal.

"You got everything ready for tonight? Anything you need, ask the girls."

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"It's a *seance,* Daniel, not a Broadway play." She looked at the house, shuddered at something she couldn't see. "Jesus. How do you stay in this place?"

"I've never lived anywhere else."

"That's not a reason."

He walked past her to the lake. Willows hung in the water, a sunfish flashed in the shallows. "We used to have a lot of fun here."

"Oh, God, don't start on that!" The acid in her laughter surprised him. "I don't need any shit about fun college days and the big game. I've had a pretty lousy life."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

"I wish you'd stayed here, Hannah. I wish you hadn't gone."

Hannah looked pained. "As I recall, Daniel, one girl wasn't enough. You had to try whoever was left. For Christ's sake, you're still doing it."

"Why do you take everything the wrong way?"

"Oh, right." She gave him a curious look. "You want to tell me something, Daniel? How did you get us back here? You just have Them send us a ticket? Did you see that goddamn plane?"

The idea was frightening and absurd. "I don't *talk* to them, Hannah."

"Just leave little notes under a rock, right?"

"It's not like that at all. They—let you know things sometimes."

"Not me, they don't," Hannah said.

Daniel looked somewhere else. Hannah was still there. "I've been here a long time. Maybe it's different when They live this close to people. Once They wanted old books. I *knew* that. I don't know how. I knew they had a ghost. I knew you and John were coming. Maybe They got you out of my head; hell, I don't know." He faced her. "Look. Before that, I didn't even know if you and John were still alive."

"Well, we are. My luck's running rotten as ever. What happens when this is over? What happens to *me*?" The life seemed to go out of her eyes. He thought that he'd feel better without her anger. Instead, he was somehow uneasy, disconcerted, as if he'd seen her more than naked.

"They don't care, Hannah," he said. "They just want this done."

"Is that so?"

"They don't care," he said, aware that he was saying this again.

"Go molest someone," Hannah said. "Leave me the hell alone."

"The lady doesn't like you very much," Katie said.

"I expect she's got a reason," Daniel said.

"You two used to get it on, huh?"

"He doesn't want to talk about that," Doreen said. "That's private."

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"Well I am *so* sorry, everyone." Katie cleaned mud off a bottle of wine. She cooled wine deep in the lake and pulled the bottles out on a string.

"It doesn't matter," Daniel said.

"The priest isn't feeling real good," Doreen said. "I took him up soup, but he didn't eat it."

"Religious people don't eat a whole lot."

"Why not?"

"They just don't."

"He's not bad looking," Katie said. "For a guy your age, I mean."

"He'll be delighted," Daniel said. "I know I am."

Katie laughed. Doreen looked disapproving. Doreen was a ferret in bed, a prude during most of her waking hours. Katie was just the other way. Daniel couldn't figure either one. "Water the wine good," he told Katie. "I don't want our witch getting whacked."

"We don't have to be *in* there, do we?" Doreen asked. It was easy to see how she'd vote.

"No," Daniel said, "of course you don't. Go to bed and stay there, is my advice."

They seemed relieved. As if they were afraid he might have asked them to do something they didn't want to do. Maybe he didn't really know them at all.

"This is ridiculous," Hannah said. "I feel like a complete fool."

"It'll come back to you," Daniel said. "You used to be great."

"I used to put on a great show, is what I did."

"That's not true. Some spooky things happened."

"You saw what you wanted to see. You lifted up the table with your legs."

"Not always," Daniel said.

"I am not staying in here for this," John announced.

"I think you need to, John. You're part of it." Doreen was right. John had lost his color.

"Wait," Hannah said, "I'm getting something now." She pressed her fingers to her head and closed her eyes. "Yes, I *see* it. Katie's having her period. You are greatly distressed."

"Damn it, Hannah!" John was clearly furious. Hannah looked surprised and slightly askew. Daniel decided that the liquor wasn't secure. She'd likely filched a bottle during the day.

"Is it all right if I ask a simple question," John said, "or is that out of order in all this?"

"Ask," Daniel said.

"How long has this—haunting thing been going on? Do we know that?"

"Why the sudden interest?" Hannah said.

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"I'm asking as a person, not as a priest. This isn't a priest question, Hannah."

"I can't give you a good answer," Daniel said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I know maybe three things about Them, John. They don't like machines. They like it quiet. They don't mind us if we're not—aggressive. I don't think They pay much attention to us at all. I can't answer your question, because I don't think They see *time* passing the way we do. Don't ask me for ten examples, Hannah, which is what you're about to do. I can't explain that. I've been here for a long while, and I've got ideas about things. I'm saying that I don't know if this spook's been around six weeks or six years. I don't think they *measure* time like that."

"Oh, that's a big help," Hannah said.

"Anyway, what difference does it make?" Daniel asked.

"Not any, I guess." John shrugged and crossed his legs. "Just wondered if it was their ghost or ours."

"Jesus." Hannah looked alarmed.

"It's a pointless question," Daniel said, irritated at John.

"Not to me, it isn't," Hannah said. "I'm not calling up a dead one of *theirs*."

"You're a fake. What do you care?"

"What if I'm not?" Hannah said. "Someone get me a goddamn drink."

Daniel felt frightened and foolish. It was an odd and unstable emotional mix. The darkness was complete, the moon playing tricks. Maybe a dog would howl. He tried to remember what Lon Chaney looked like, and couldn't. John sprawled in his chair, protesting all this with bad posture. A candle sputtered in a dish. They held hands. Hannah's hand was wet, or maybe his. John's was dry as stone.

"Okay," Hannah said suddenly, "so is anybody here, or what?"

John laughed, apparently unable to help it.

"Get serious," Daniel said.

"You want to be medium, go ahead."

Hannah leaned back and took a breath. Getting serious, Daniel supposed, or giving it a try. Her hand tightened in his and Daniel watched the candle set them apart, isolate them with some sort of magic. The old high ceilings, the dark polished shelves, were outside this sphere of light, the three of them within. Hannah's lids fluttered, possibly part of the act. She muttered to herself, the sound reaching Daniel like summer bees. He caught John's eye. John was looking right at Hannah, head tilted to one side and slightly perplexed. The expression dogs get when they try to understand what people say.

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Daniel was thinking that this was pleasant in a way, that the three of them were here. They weren't who they'd been, but who was. And, nudging this thought like one layer of water slightly cooler than the next, what he was going to do when this gypsy act folded and he still had a ghost or whatever it was down below, disturbing Things he didn't want disturbed in any way. The thought never went further than that, because Hannah suddenly went rigid and hurt his hand. Something terrible and cold had found them. Something clearly puzzled by them as well, ethereally confused. There was a cry Daniel imagined as that of a mouse in the clutches of an owl, but apparently coming from Hannah, who was pressed flat against her chair, shaking like electric shock treatment forty-nine.

"Oh Jesus oh Jesus. . . ." Hannah seemed stuck on this and made no effort to move. Daniel thought to look at John, and found a sack of kittens. Drowned maybe three or four days. John soaked in sweat, hair and clothes stuck to his skin. Daniel carried him without effort to the couch. Katie and Doreen appeared in the door, frightened and disheveled, scared out of an adolescent ménage he'd seemingly missed.

"Get some water," Daniel said, "hurry."

The girls vanished. Daniel checked Hannah and saw nothing new. And then he *felt* it, a clearly perceptible grind, massive and unconfined, somewhere below the house. He knew at once that the spook had been down there as well, that it was still haunting the burrows. That Something wasn't very happy about it at all. He hoped his heart would stop. Katie and Doreen returned with water. John opened his eyes, but didn't speak. Daniel left him to the girls, and found Scotch behind Blackwood and Poe.

"You okay?" he asked Hannah.

"Oh, I'm just fine," Hannah said. "Do I look fine to you?" She drank out of the bottle, glancing over at John. "I wish I had something to shoot you with."

"I didn't know this would happen."

"You're getting me out of this place in the morning. Early. You're going to do that, Daniel."

"We stirred up our spook, Hannah. I don't know if it's gone."

Hannah looked appalled. "You think I'm going to do that *again*?"

"We'll have to think of something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Get some sleep."

"You better not have any guns around here. You better not, or I'll find them."

Doreen and Katie seemed to enjoy playing nurse. They fussed over John and got him to sit in a chair on the porch. John drank tea, and

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when the girls would leave him alone he watched the morning sun pattern the temple on the hill. Daniel studied him from the yard, and decided that he wasn't looking at anything at all. He was filtering out images maybe two or three feet in front of his eyes.

"The lady's bombed out real good," Katie reported. "I looked in a couple of times."

"Let her be," Daniel said. He watched Katie assume an unlikely angle in the cane-bottom chair in the kitchen, brown limbs tangled in the legs. Doreen stopped moving sometimes, but Katie didn't.

"Me and Doreen were scared," Katie said.

"I guess you were," Daniel said.

"You going to fix this?"

"I hope maybe I can. You want to stay or go? You do whatever you want."

"I think maybe stay. Doreen says we're better off."

"What do you say?"

"Nothing. I don't care. I don't want to be scared too much, is all."

"I'm sorry that happened," Daniel said.

"I guess so," John said.

Daniel didn't like the way he looked. He hadn't seemed bad in the morning. Now his skin had the texture of stuff on a pond. As if he'd had some disease a long time and wasn't getting any better.

"My house in Cardiff is quite small," John said. "I could get one bigger if I liked. There are hundreds of houses around. A smaller place seemed better for a priest. I guess that's a sin of false something. If I think about having a finer house, the sin's the same."

"I think you ought to do what you want," Daniel said.

"You mean get a better house? What kind do you recommend?"

"I don't know anything about that, John."

"I think maybe Georgian. There's a certain dignity to that. Of course dignity's close to pride. It seems to me it is."

"You know anything about exorcism, John?"

"Do I what?"

"Exorcism, you know. The Church has something on it. I don't know just what, that's your department. You feel a little better, we could talk."

John seemed to partially emerge. "Go fuck yourself, Daniel. Go fuck yourself in a ditch. I'll live anywhere I like. Architectural style is up to me. Go in peace, if you want."

"That was a shitty thing to do," Hannah said. "Katie told me. You ought to just leave him alone."

Girl-talk with Katie. This was something new. "John's doing theolog-

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ical battle," Daniel said. "He experienced something he didn't think he believed."

"That's good. Psychology coming from you."

"I've got to get this ghost business cleared up," Daniel said. "If John can help, I've got to ask. That spook didn't come from any table tipping, Hannah."

"He's not going to help in the state he's in," Hannah said. "Anyway, how do you know that? You said it last night. That you didn't think it was gone. How do you *know*?"

"I don't. That's what I think." He couldn't tell her that there was great dissatisfaction below the ground. She wouldn't want to hear about that. "What else did Katie tell you?"

"Don't worry. We discussed Moroccan cooking."

"Katie's never cooked anything in her life."

"Maybe she's getting domestic. Maybe she's building a nest." Hannah laughed at Daniel's alarm. "Should have thought of that, friend. You can't run a Girl Scout troop without maybe baking a cookie."

Katie seemed perplexed at Daniel's concern. He realized that Hannah was still adroit at hooking him cleanly through the gills. He didn't need that at the moment. There was a problem that needed solving. *Right now*. He couldn't tell them what would happen if it wasn't. He didn't have the slightest idea, and didn't want to try to guess.

It was clear now that John couldn't help. The seance had left him addled. Escaping the girls' care, he had left the front porch and wandered off. Doreen called Daniel. Daniel found John at the tennis courts, chopping with a hoe at thirty years of weedy neglect. He worked at a fever pitch. Divine infusion had given him strength. He worked in pajamas and a straw hat.

"God wants me back in tennis," he said cheerfully. "My backhand was a problem. I think I've got it licked."

"Good," Daniel said. "You want to come in for supper?"

"We'll have to resurface the whole thing."

"I'll see to it." He led John back to the house. John voiced concern with misuse of the Doric arch. Katie got him to bed.

Doreen burned supper, and that seemed to set the tone for the evening. Katie asked pointless questions about birds. Only Hannah seemed unaffected. She didn't drink, which told Daniel something. He caught expectant looks around the table. As if he might announce a lottery winner.

"I went up to Tangier," Hannah said. "Last winter. There are twenty-two people up there. Mostly men. They all live in this one house. The whole city's vacant, but they live in this one crappy house. I made them

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Swedish meatballs and Creole shrimp. It seemed to have some aphrodisiacal effect."

Doreen wanted to know what that was.

"I'll be in the library," Daniel said, uncertain he could handle any more of this. It seemed the thing to do. He felt he was a barometer for the group. That if they didn't have him there, the pressure would ease. That didn't make a lot of sense. He couldn't tell them what to do. He didn't know himself. The books he'd found were popular tales of ghosts in British castles. They didn't seem to apply. In no case were the hauntees more frightening than the haunters.

Hannah came in. "I thought I'd get a drink," she said.

"I'd feel a lot better if you did," Daniel told her.

"You look like Vincent Price in here. The girls wanted to know who Mickey Mouse was. That led in several odd directions. They don't know anything, do they? I forget how much is gone."

"I guess so." Hannah moved with remembered grace. When she'd stepped off the plane, he'd seen a past Hannah projected. There was no longer the illusion that she was young, which likely meant he wasn't either.

"They giggled about Kotex," Hannah said. "Doreen said she thought she'd seen a Coke once. Daniel, I am fairly scared right now. I feel *something* . . . I don't know what."

"I'm sorry, Hannah."

"I don't know how you could do this to me. If you say you're sorry again, I'll break this bottle over your head."

"I think maybe I'll check on John."

"You do that," Hannah said. "He's talking about a doubles match with Jesus. He thinks Katie's a nun. I hope you're happy with this circus."

He couldn't imagine sleep. Doreen tried to get something going, mostly out of the jitters. Daniel didn't respond. He lay awake and listened to her breathe. When he was little, he was frightened every night. In this house. He'd thought every night about gorillas. Gorillas were very big in the forties. They terrorized natives in the movies, and followed you home to bed. You had to fight sleep and watch the window. And now he was watching it again. He'd learned to live with what was there because They were more abstract than something real. Like being frightened of God. You vaguely followed the rules and hoped for the best. Now it didn't seem like that at all.

He thought about Hannah. Lazy afternoons in the bed he was sleeping in now. Hannah scarcely older than Doreen. The smells sharp and clean, the heady odor of love and Pall Malls, the residue of baby oil and iodine that turned Hannah gold as a magazine ad. The memory maybe sweeter

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than it was, but how could you know for sure. He wandered off into that and imagined he was asleep, dreaming he was awake. That she came to him and everything was fine. That she held him and said "Christ Daniel—please!" Katie just past her, and that was food for thought. Had they come in together or what? And then a look in Hannah's eyes that brought him up and fully awake.

"What is it?" he said. "What's wrong?"

Hannah didn't answer. Katie whispered Doreen awake and drew her away. Hannah's hand was cold in his. She led him to the high French doors, stopped behind him. It was clear she wasn't going any further, and this didn't help Daniel at all. He knew he'd have to look. Nothing would get him out of that. He felt a great sense of relief when nothing was there, that Hannah had let her fears get out of hand. He couldn't blame her for that. They all had reason enough to jump at shadows. And then, as if he hadn't seen clearly before, as if he hadn't really allowed himself to look, this delusion was stripped away, shifting to a heart-stopping understanding of *mass,* of a presence between the temple and the house. Daniel smelled wet earth, deep burrows and years, felt a ponderous weight of displeasure that left him shaken. All this real and illusory at once, there in an instant or half the night, and he was uneasily certain that a season or half a breath meant nothing to what was there. . . .

"Daniel, come look at John," Katie said. "Daniel, *please*!"

Daniel turned from the window, the quality of her voice telling him more than he wanted to know. Katie tried not to cry. Doreen held her close. When Daniel looked out at the night, he saw the temple on the hill, familiar trees, the dark stretch of lawn and nothing more. He sensed that what was out there had seen what It wanted to see. He didn't want to go and look at John.

Between the tennis courts and the lake seemed as good a place as any. John had liked the temple, but Daniel wasn't about to bury him there. On the way back to the house, the girls started to cry. Daniel told them it was all right. They said they'd miss him, they didn't want to go. But only half of that was true. He couldn't ask them to stay, and wouldn't. They'd never be easy here now, and they knew it.

"You'll be fine," he said. "It's what I want you to do." They took too long saying good-bye. Daniel shooed them off. "Don't sell them to the Arabs," he told Hannah.

"That's you, all right," Hannah said. "Jokes at a time like this."

"Leave the pickup at the runway. I'll get it sometime."

"That goddamn plane better come."

"Hold the good thought," Daniel said. He looked after the girls. Tried to snap leggy pictures in his head.

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"I think you're a son of a bitch, Daniel," Hannah said. "I think you knew something awful like this would happen."

"I didn't know anything at all," Daniel said wearily.

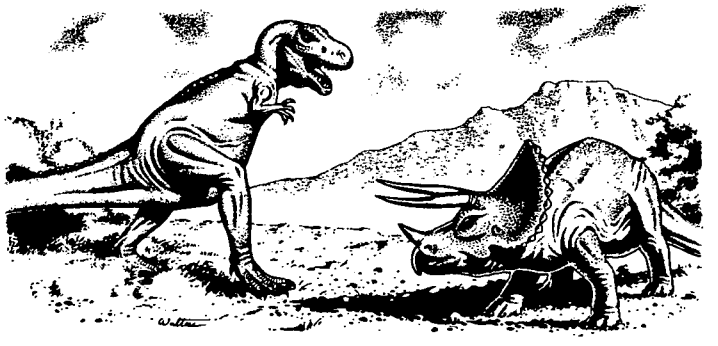
"I hope it gets around to haunting *you*. I sure as hell would, if it were me."

"I can use the company," Daniel said. "Just so it leaves the burrows alone."

It was easier to tell her that. Easier than trying to tell her that the spook was gone. A hell of a lot easier than telling her that it was *John* who'd done the haunting. Just not in the usual order you might expect. Dying usually came first, and *then* the ghost, but that didn't bother Them down below. He'd guessed long ago that whatever lived in the burrows had kinky clocks. It was half past purple down there, a quarter till yesterday.

No use going over that, he decided. It wasn't what Hannah wanted to hear. Getting mad was what she wanted. Mad was easier than double reverse daylight zonker time, the plausibility of pre-departed spooks. Daniel didn't much want to think about it either. John's ghost scaring John into dying. Watching movies backwards from the middle hurt his head.

She didn't say good-bye. She picked up her duffel and walked away and Daniel went inside. The house seemed big and empty. He walked from room to room, the way cats assure themselves that no one else is around. No one was. He wondered about simply walking away. Going somewhere else, or catching up with Hannah and the girls. He'd thought about it before. Maybe They wouldn't know. Maybe They'd notice last September. He decided not to think about it again. He found a bottle of wine Katie had left him, and pulled his chair to the kitchen door. He dipped cold cornbread in the wine. When the sun was down an hour, two does and a buck came up and stuck their heads between the fence and ate his lettuce. Daniel drank and watched. ●



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Ian Watson's recent U.S. publications include *Deathhunter* (St. Martin's), *The Book of Ian Watson* (Ziesing), and the "River" trilogy from DAW.

by Ian Watson

THE MOON AND MICHELANGELO

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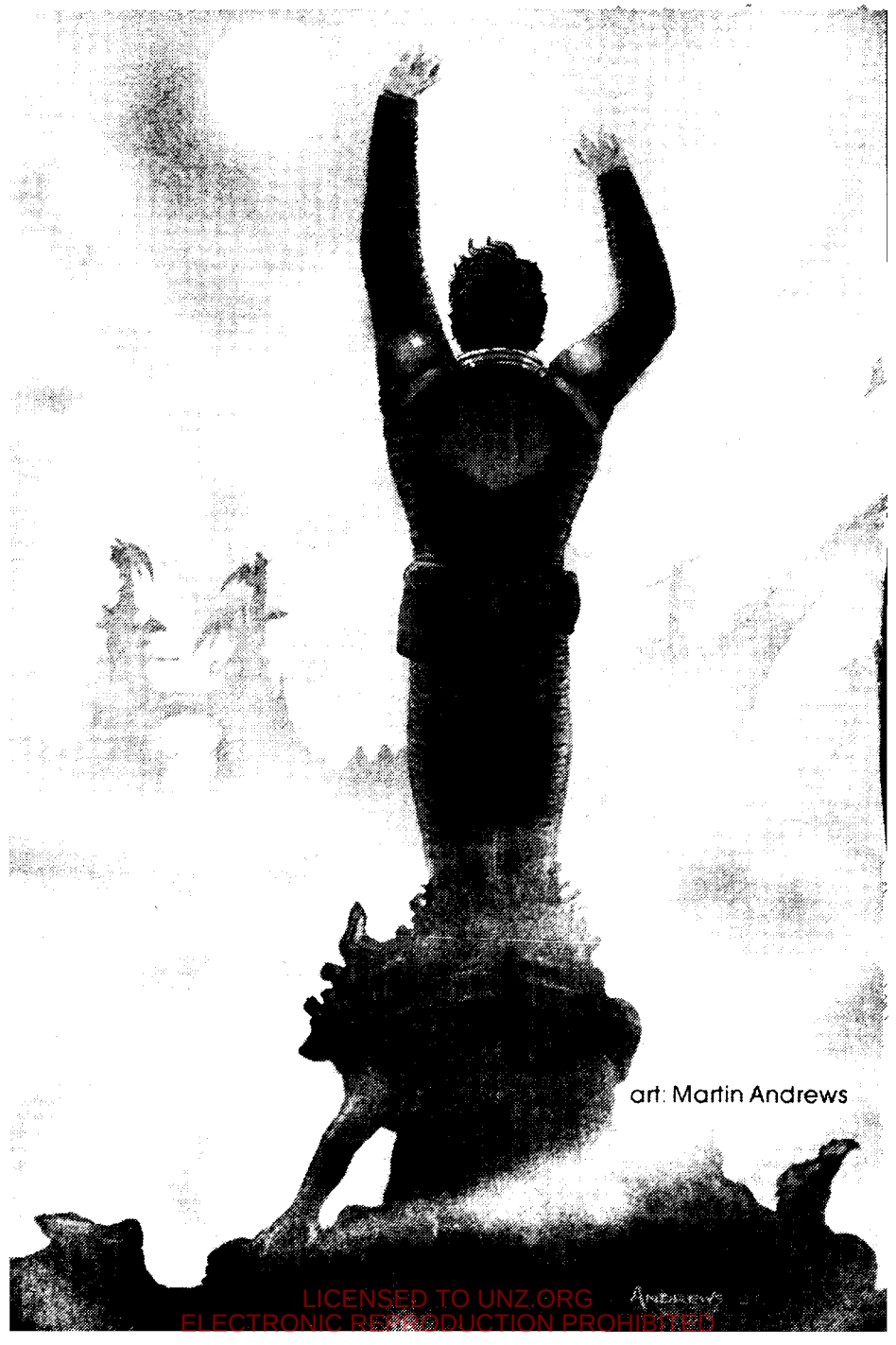

art: Martin Andrews

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Peter Catlow woke from a dream of a wide straight road stretching invitingly through cow pastures and willow trees upon a sunset evening towards, yes, some village with a pub where the real ale would be strong and malty just the way he liked it.

He lay trying to keep hold of the dream, since it was years since such rural scenes had existed in such an unprotected form. As an earlier image clarified he realized that the dream had only been a half happy one, for the road of his dream had set out from one of the gateways of the alien city. His right arm had been trapped in the mouth of one of the stone Herms; he'd been struggling to pull free.

Pins and needles stung Peter's hand as paralyzed flesh thawed. He'd been sleeping on his arm, squeezing the blood flow.

Though he was sure that it must still be the middle of the alien night, as soon as he turned over to catch more shut-eye his alarm began to bleep. Disbelievingly he slapped the alarm off, slapped on the light (and his wake-up tape of Vaughan Williams' *Variations on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*), and swung out of bed before he could relapse. A button unshuttered the window upon another streaky-bacon dawn on Rock.

Not that the landscape was barren; the brightening light of swiftly-rising Tau Ceti was disclosing lush herbage, the vegetable fields checkered purple and emerald, a sinuous fish-rich river, and a forest of giant ferns and bottle-trees. But whereas Earth people had named their world after the flesh of the planet, the soft fruitful soil, the lemur-like natives of Tau Ceti II apparently preferred to call theirs after the bones of the planet, the hard skeleton. Apparently.

From the edge of the window of his little cubicle Peter could see a kilometer away the southeastern flank of the city writhing with its gargoyles and grotesques.

Mary Everdon had said to him: "Perhaps for the natives the hardness of rock, and the manipulation of rock into shapes dense with meaning, equates with their emergence from biology, from organic nature, into culture and permanence and history? Carved rock and sculpted stone equals thought solidified and redeemed from timelessness into the new stream of sapient time."

Each time that she voiced her embryonic theory, it seemed to put on more weight, to become ever more viable. But Peter thought of it as her intellectual phantom pregnancy—which could become ever more convincing until one embarrassing day she might need to face the fact that there was nothing in it, after all. Of course, that was Mary's merit too, in an extraterrestial context: the ability to make speculative leaps.

Mary pointed out that this city near which the expedition had set down was only one of many such carved wonderlands (or horror-villes) scattered about the two habitable continents which shared the same side of

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the world, nestling together like a pair of cashew nuts. The closest distance between any two cities was a couple of hundred kilometers. Forest or swamp, desert or mountain intervened. No road network existed. So the architecture must display the psychic bedrock of the inhabitants, must be a way of perceiving and celebrating their own triumphant separation from unthinking nature.

As Peter let the pastoral swell of Vaughan Williams tone up his nervous system (while he washed quickly, while he shaved) he contemplated another day which wouldn't last long enough to tire a fellow without taking a pill, to be followed by another night not long enough to rest oneself adequately.

"This planet makes me feel prematurely old," he'd confided to Mary in the refectory the evening before, while they hastily spooned up their dinner of chili con carne before the nightly info-swap began, prelude to bedtime.

The forty-strong complement of the shuttle base munched their spiced beans and chattered science at twenty little tables. (Prevent cliques; prevent isolation. Nevertheless, there were cliques. Nevertheless there was. . . .) Cheery yellow plastic walls; several doors open to the corridor; Commander's podium; large video screen showing a Californian beachscape that particular evening. Overhead the large bubble skylight framed one of the two bright moons chasing its partner in vain, or being chased. Periodically (not now) you saw the glint of the orbiting voidship, *Michelangelo*—named a touch arrogantly after Earth's supreme sculptor—with the non-landing crew on board. They would soon get their treat: a trip out to orbit the third, fourth, and fifth planets which were two modest airless deserts plus an awesome gas-giant with family of moons; before returning for pick-up.

Since Mary usually generated a theory she asked, "Does your specialty make you feel you're a sort of medieval person, who's ancient compared with all this?" She smiled with sympathetic bonhomie.

He shook his head. "No, it's because when you're young the days seem to stretch out endlessly, yet they shrink as you grow older. Here, the days have all suddenly grown very short, as though I've aged twenty or thirty years."

"How old are you? I've forgotten. Is it forty-eight?"

"That's right." She hadn't forgotten.

They had all had access to each others' bios, and according to the bare bones of hers Mary Everdon was thirty-nine years old, doctorate in cultural anthropology from . . . Peter couldn't care less where. Mary was unattached, plumpish, red-haired. She reminded him of (Had she taken lovers? What were her erotic preferences? If any.)

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Peter nodded in the direction of Carl Lipmann, the blond scrawny linguist.

"It's a pity we can't ask the natives how they feel, and understand the answers." It was a pity he couldn't bring himself to ask Mary outright how she felt about him.

"Not yet. We're making progress, aren't we?"

Was *he*?

"They twitter and warble like birds."

"Ah, but in a flexibly structured way. And we have quite a few sound-groups provisionally pegged with meanings. So it's a true language." She raised her voice. "They're far from being some sort of mammalian *termite,* as Fremantle had the nerve to suggest."

Barney Fremantle, bald and natty, sat two tables away with Sandra Ramirez the ecologist (black waterfall of curls). The biologist cocked an ear and shrugged. He had a sample bag beside him, which he patted like an obedient dog. Fremantle had suggested that the building of the city and the intricate carving of the natives might simply be wired-in, instinctual behavior—akin to the artistic forecourts of bower birds—and that they weren't genuinely sapient. This, despite their wooden agricultural implements and their sledge-carts, and their cooking bowls and their use of fire; despite the presumption that they must possess *metal* tools so as to have sculpted their ornate city.

Peter wasn't here in quite the same capacity as the other experts from sciences hard and soft. After the drone-probe had hyperpulsed its highly detailed aerial pictures of the cities of Rock back to Earth, it had been decided imaginatively to include a stonemason in the exploration team. A stonemason should have practical, existential knowledge of what seemed to be the main manifestation of the native culture.

When the invitation had come—when some computer had kicked up his name as a master stonemason without family ties—Peter had been in charge of renovating the abacus of ancient statues on the front of acid-eaten Lichfield Cathedral, now that the town was safely protected by a Fuller dome. Perhaps it was nostalgia, rather than the promise of interstellar adventure, which prompted his acceptance. To be able to stroll through a city of uneroded carvings under an open sky, a city neither rotted by pollution nor air-conditioned like a museum piece.

As Peter scraped up his last spoonful, Commander Ash strode to the podium, short, stocky, crew-cut, her oval face nevertheless (or perhaps on account of the crew-cut) that of a delicate china doll. She blanked the screen.

"Need for brevity," she reminded. "I'll guillotine garrulity."

Oh yes she would; and during the info-swap they would all talk in the same clipped telegraphic way. How to cram a pint into a half-pint pot.

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Likewise activity by day and sleep by night. Likewise the Commander's own physique: a pint of power in a half-pint frame, with irrelevant coiffure shorn off. No time to bother with your hair on Rock. Emulate the name of the world; have head like a boulder. Made of china. Peter felt his brain gearing up to match the pace of the info-swap.

Yet Mary's hair was very long, a flood of generous fire. . . . Did Mary realize that this might subtly irritate Ash, and merit an impatient hearing?

"Change to double-day cycle?" the geologist (and temporary Rockologist) Stevens requested. "Field-work one day plus whole night's data analysis; sleep through whole next day and night?"

"Waste too much time sleeping then," judged Ash. "Be soldiers of science; learn to cat-nap. Next?"

It wasn't long before Fremantle rose, darting a look of amused triumph towards Mary.

"Reporting trip into forest. Bottle-trees come in dozen main shapes; all are hollow shells supporting fronds."

"Known," said Ash.

"Shells show fracture lines, large-piece jigsaw patterns. Stone smashes shells into constituent fragments." Reaching into his bag, he exhibited one of the native wooden spades with short curved handle, the specimen wrapped in film. "This." Now he placed a native wok on the table. "Or this." He flourished a film-clad wooden knife. "Plus sharp shards. All known native artifacts readily available from nature."

Mary sat wounded, momentarily confused. All data would be put on the infonet for access and review by anyone else. Meanwhile, Fremantle seemed to have scored a coup.

"Bio-technology?" asked Peter helpfully. He knew the concept. "Trees bred for tools?"

Fremantle laughed brusquely but it was agronomist Vasilki Patel who supplied the answer.

"Bio-tech requires microscopes, laser scalpels. Farm crops indicate only simple improvement over wild strains."

"Amazing," said Stevens, with a note of sarcasm, "those trees falling apart so conveniently into identifiable tools; quite naturally too." He also was trying to be helpful: Rockologist in league with stonemason.

Sandra Ramirez spoke up from beside Fremantle. "Hypothesis: wrecking a tree has connection with reproductive cycle. Lemurs wreck trees which produce useful shapes. Thus evolutionary selection favors trees which split up usefully; against those which didn't."

Stevens looked towards Peter. "Bottle-wood tools sufficient for sculpture? If tempered by fire?"

Peter thought of his own power-tools and chisels back home. Power-

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tools to rough out a block of stone—in the old days apprentices would rough out a block more laboriously by hand—and chisels, strong sharp chisels. Their abrasive action, the sparks that flew, produced a protective surface on a stone which would let it weather out its first few years until the regular hardening could set in. How could the natives produce such strong, such detailed surfaces by banging away with wood, however hard?

No one had seen a single identifiable mason at work. One item Peter had to correct his colleagues about on arrival was the notion that masons carved anything in position by preference. Stone was unpredictable; even the best master mason could spoil a piece through no fault of his own. The sensible way to work was down on the ground. Each figure should jut from a supporting block which was subsequently winched into position in a pre-planned gap. So you wouldn't expect to see lemur masons clinging to walls and chipping away. But even so.

Nor had anyone seen evidence of loose, unused blocks of stone lying around or in transit.

Maybe they simply hadn't yet stumbled upon a masons' yard in the maze of the city. Maybe secret ritual surrounded the art of masonry? Maybe the lemur masons had hidden their metal tools away when the expedition arrived, just as a sensible tribe might hide its treasures from potential conquerors?

Maybe the work had all been completed ages ago? But surely it hadn't been. And surely there should be some evidence of ongoing building work?

"Comment," said Ash sharply.

Peter shook his head.

"Maybe *you* should try," suggested the Ismaili agronomist. "Carve blank jut of wall using bottle-wood?"

"Carve *Michelangelo was here*," said Fremantle. "Might activate natives. Provide cultural insights for Everdon. Valiant effort at artistic communication using native mode, eh? If no response, native behavior is hard-wired."

"How would you like it," asked Peter, "if aliens landed in Paris and started carving graffiti over the front of Notre Dame?"

"Improve it, probably."

In fact Peter had once carved a graffito of a kind upon an Oxford college: a playful caricature of his own head gazing out from the top of a tower. Wearing a veritable dunce's or wizard's hat parodying the mason's neatly folded daily paper hat which kept the dust from one's curls. His large ears exaggerated into jug-ears, his prominent nose sticking out like Pinocchio's, jaw dimpled as if by a pickaxe, eyes wrinkled up to a vanishing point (to avoid splinters).

The nose had been a mistake. Back then, Fuller domes were new and

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exhibited quirks of micro-climate. Little clouds could form. Condensation drops gathered on the end of such a nose and dripped as if he had a runny cold. Maybe that feature was considered a witticism by subsequent generations of students: the wizard with the drippy nose. Since no real rain fell inside Fuller domes and genuine gargoyles were forever dry, perhaps his nose was in a very minor sense the only working gargoyle left.

"You haven't proved they use wood tools!" blustered Peter.

"Take metal chisel, hammer, demonstrate human mason's art," suggested Vasilki Patel.

"Cultural interference," objected Mary. "Analyzing categories of carvings more important, this stage. Catlow's viewpoint more valuable here. Establish lexicon of stone images."

"Report when complete," said Ash. "Enough on topic. Base security?"

"Sweet and simple," reported Leo Allen. The black man co-ordinated all outside surveillance and image-gathering as well as supervising the infonet.

"Medical?"

Doctor Chang said, "Clean slate. Still no interaction our micro-orgs, Rock's micro-orgs. Probably unnecessary even wear masks. Recommend continue, though, be double safe. Besides, the odors—"

The atmosphere of Rock was an acceptable oxy-nitrogen mix. Native proteins were based on D-amino acids that were right-handed, as were the sugars in the local nucleic acids—unlike the left-handed counterparts on Earth. Chang had declared that humans could eat the local veg and fish without any effect whatever; they would excrete everything unused. Nothing gut-wrenching, nothing nutritious. Protein incompatibility. So you had to bring a packed lunch to Rock, unless, as Vasilki said, you intended to set up in competition with the local veg by planting Earth seeds and letting the rivals crowd the native veg for available minerals. Charmed against any local bugs or viruses by their left-handedness, Earth crops ought to win hands down.

Ash said, "Am authorizing *Michelangelo* depart on grand tour two nights hence, sixteenth hour local. Returning after forty days, local, for flight Solward. Hope for full local info by then."

"We see *M* go?" asked a woman chemist, Liz Martel.

"Yes. Fusion fireworks overhead, fine show."

"Observe effect on natives?" asked Lipmann. "Night duty?"

"Indeed," said Ash. "That night."

Mary stood up, red hair swinging. "Depart farside world instead? Avoid cultural impact?"

Ash shook her head. "Best orbital departure."

"But *M* orbits whole world constantly! Well, depart daytime instead? Minimize shock from sudden light in sky?"

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"Spoilsport!" burst from Liz Martel.

"Timing already computed."

"Change it! Cultural impact."

"Maybe fruitful." Ash smiled slightly towards Fremantle. "If true culture exists."

It was obvious to Peter that the matter was already fixed, in Mary's disfavor.

To protest further, or shut up? Possible black mark on bio. Insubordinate. Mary nodded and sat down.

"End of info-swap," said Ash.

Since you couldn't take your filter-mask off outside to feed, breakfast the next morning was a hefty, though hurried, affair of pawpaw, reconstituted omelet over huge slices of ham, waffles, and syrup, muffins and honey, pints of coffee. Afterwards Peter set out with Mary and Carl Lipmann for the city. Already lemur farmers were out in their veg fields, hoeing or harvesting. Fisherfolk were heading for the river. The humans joined one of the sledge paths.

"Bit swinish, that bottle-wood business," remarked Carl. Of course, reflected Peter, Fremantle's discovery was a slap in the face to the linguist too. If the natives were only highly programmed animals using tools that nature provided, their "language" might be an illusion too. A parrot could mimic speech with every appearance of beady-eyed intelligence, as well as screeching its own fixed repertoire. A chimp could chatter a sort of limited conversation, a dolphin could click and whistle. You'd still be barking up a gum tree if you hoped for full flexible communication.

"It would be enormously useful," said Mary, "to find some metal tools which had demonstrably been *made*—for sculpting, eh Peter?"

"You know how carefully I've examined their work," he said, "and I still can't swear to what tools were used. A fine bit of work isn't covered in chisel chips. Art lies in the concealment of art. Maybe . . . maybe they just rubbed away at the rock for years on end till they wore out the figures they wanted."

"Like the Skull of Doom?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"A perfect human skull in rock crystal. It's in a Mexican museum. The Mayans made it by rubbing away at a solid block of rock crystal. Must have taken years. I can't imagine the decoration of entire cities being rubbed into shape the same way!"

"Maybe," said Carl, "each figure occupies the whole of one lemur's lifetime, off and on. Maybe it's his or her ritual life-image."

"In that case you'd find half-finished work," Mary pointed out.

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"Maybe they stopped making images fifty years ago, five hundred years ago? Funny self-image they must have of themselves, though!" For now they were nearing the south-east entry gate guarded by its grotesque Herms or termains, whichever term one preferred to name boundary or entrance markers. Peter had supplied both names. Herms, from the Greek god of doorways, Hermes. Termains, from the Latin word terminus. On either side of the Herms stretched the frozenly writhing, leering wall, massed gargoyles jutting as if vomiting.

"Exactly," said Mary. "These are the keys to their psyche."

And by now half a dozen lemurs were tagging alongside, twittering interestedly. None of the adults stood more than four feet high. The swirls and hues of their tight, close fur varied endlessly from individual to individual, fingerprinting each in auburn, russet, orange, brown which might be solid-hued or dappled or with hints of stripes. Lemurs wore no clothes or ornaments of any sort. Indeed, to hide the body might be to hide the self since their faces were all much the same: dun colored, with the same large black melancholy eyes, pert twitchy noses, erect rounded ears, lugubrious mouths. The slight breasts and genital slits of the females and the retracted penises of the males were veiled by fur. Lemur arms were long and dangly; the hands had three thin fingers and a thumb.

A female plucked at Carl's tunic and warbled. Twitching his own nose behind the transparent mask with friendly humor, he adjusted the soundbud in his left ear, fiddled with the minicomp and corder clipped to his belt, and twittered in response. Perhaps in response.

He explained: "I'm trying to say: want / see / tools / cut / rock. But maybe I just said, 'I want you to watch me dig the world'! Peter, would you please mime the mason's art? Oh yes, and rubbing too?"

Nowhere had they found any simple carved representations of lemurs. The Herms were soaring, elongated heads with eyes the size of dinner plates above gaping, sharp-toothed mouths. Stone beard burst from the sucked-in cheeks, straggling down like horsehair eviscerated from an old upholstered chair, knotting and massing to almost hide a stubby, squat, dwarf body. All in perfect stone, except that these Herms looked newly sloshed with night-soil liquified in urine.

The arch of the gate curving between the two Herms was a quartet of capering, interlacing babewyns, a popular motif. These were baboon-like beings, stretched out as though their bones had melted. Again, Peter had supplied the appropriate medieval name for such carved lusty baboon-buffoons.

While Carl twittered again, Peter stepped over to the nearest Herm, grateful for his mask. The lemurs collected their own night-soil assiduously, brown soup of excrement and pee. Instead of carting this out to

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fertilize the fields they hurled the contents of the bottle-wood buckets at their sculpted walls or poured the mixture with gay abandon over monstrosities and gargoyles.

(At an earlier info-swap: "Ritual insult," Mary had theorized. "Thus to domesticate the fearful images."

(Fremantle had retorted, "Maybe lemurs inherited cities from genuine intelligences that died out?"

(Mary had returned to the fray: "Perhaps act of respect, reverence. Excrement not taboo—but gift of self. Stuff of one's own creation."

(While Peter had said, "Maybe do that to protect, strengthen surfaces?"

(That chemist woman, Martel, had hooted.

(Since then, he'd also seen lemur cooks chucking over the stone art the water in which they'd boiled veg or fish.)

The lemur female watched with curiosity while Peter went through the motions of tapping away with a mallet and chisel, and then—though he had to guess what these other motions might be—of patiently rubbing at stone.

True curiosity? Big glossy lemur eyes wore a perpetual expression of surprise and fascination, of alert astonishment.

However, this lemur then beckoned—surely she beckoned—and darted inside the gateway, to wait and beckon again.

"I do believe we're getting somewhere," Carl said in pleased surprise. "Well done."

As soon as they passed beneath the arching babewyns, their lemur set off along the northerly of three possible lanes; they followed.

Periodically Mary blazoned that day's personal code in invisible ultraviolet on protruding stonework. On the way out her bleeper would respond to those UV marks, and no others. Despite an annotated aerial survey map composited by computer from *Michelangelo*'s high-resolution photos and their own overflight before landing, it was no easy matter, otherwise, to trace one's progress with any confidence through the labyrinth of walls, pillars, lanes, yards, courts, archways, doorways, almost all of which were dense with statuary. Pathways branched frequently, almost arbitrarily, sometimes leading to dead ends. Lapids might block the way—figures emerging from or stepping into solid walls like spirits who could walk through stone. Gargoyles might sprout out overhead to join into ribbed vaulting so that what had been a lane became a hallway. A lane could enter a room through a narrow door, to resume as a broad lane beyond the far wall. Grotesques formed steps leading to tangled gargoyle bridges. Gaping stone mouths were entrances to what seemed to be cellars but which might open into airy corridors.

Their guide trotted ahead, warbling, glancing back, occasionally flap-

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ping an arm, though she may only have been slapping at the equivalent of a flea in her fur.

Peter noted a huge scaly devil-creature with ribbed, bar-like wings. This jutted from the top of a short free-standing wall which seemed to have no other rationale than to support that devil. The blocks of the wall, perhaps forty in number, were condensed, squashed stone bodies as though creatures had been crushed inside suitcase-sized molds, there to harden.

"That chap's definitely new," said Peter, and took a holo.

"New?" queried Carl.

"New to me. I've never seen the like before."

"Oh."

"I've never been in this part of town."

Still wondering at the devil, Peter fell back a few paces so that now he brought up the rear. From that vantage point he could admire Mary's hips and the hang of her red hair as she bustled onward. No denying it, she did remind him of a certain buxom rural barmaid he'd known once. However, that bouncy barmaid had been keener on a recently widowed farmer who turned to her for sympathy, and more.

Peter had always been a bachelor, more by accident than design. Wedded to stone, he was. Somehow his work with stone had seemed to express—yet also to limit—the sensuality which he felt was part of him, deep down. Had he been a sculptor of marble, of smooth sensual flanks, he might have been able to express desire better in person. The rough hardness of the images he worked on, their often grim satiric comedy, and not least their moral sententiousness seemed to distance him from expressing in actual life the lusts and greeds and devilries which those carvings parodied. If he committed a . . . fault (even though the world might regard it as no fault at all, and indeed life was a jumble of desires, envy, pride, resentment, and such) then this fault might somehow solidify and *be* him for dusty ages. On the other hand, those virtues which he also carved and lived by—the patience, loving kindness, charity, forebearance—somehow locked up his heart . . . from which, otherwise, a grinning demon might spring forth?

He sighed, and wished that Carl wasn't with him and Mary, although he liked the man and in this case three was company. No doubt he exaggerated the importance of lust, anger, envy, lust. Yet one did do so when one perpetuated, by renovation and restoration, the medieval tradition of incarnating in stone—of lapidifying—gross emblems of vice and virtue. Thus displaying in caricature monsters of the heart, by way of mockery and warning, by way of immunization against those selfsame monsters which represented human frustrations and fears.

He caught up with Mary. "I wonder," he asked, "what fears or frus-

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trations might have caused the lemurs to sculpt such monstrosities—not as a frieze to their city but as its central substance? They themselves seem gentle, innocent, happy, don't they?"

In the city no "houses" as such existed. Yet where bridges arched over yards or where gargoyles roofed corridors or where walls came together, definite living zones occured. There, a twittering mass of lemur children would play, the babies scampering on all fours swifter than any human child. There, cooking would be in progress tended by grizzled oldsters. One jumble of blackened pots brewing herbs and berries, connected by dripping wooden tubes, suggested a liquor still.

Two or three streets were noisy with groups of lemurs warbling at one another. In other streets numbers of the natives were simply curled up along the base of wallls, twitchingly asleep, looking like examples of accidie, medieval sloth. Maybe those lemurs were ill, and this was the equivalent of hospitalization. Perhaps they favored night life and had hangovers.

By day, of course, the majority of lemurs were busy in the fields or in the bottle-tree forest or along the riverbank. Or else they were fetching water from one or another crude canal sump outside the city wall, or were engaged in hauling or shoving food back to town on their sledges of bottle-wood.

No visible arts or crafts; only the all-encompassing intricate chaotic stone city itself; or perhaps one should say the solid sketch of a city, where decoration wholly outweighed function.

"How can they possibly project all of these monstrous images out of such simple natural lives?" repeated Peter.

"That's exactly it!" said Mary brightly. "Those are images from out of their burgeoning imagination, images which must inevitably scare as well as intrigue because they challenge, they stimulate, they tease. Those are fascinating creatures they see in dreams and which they need to cling on to as a promise, a warrant of increasing complexity of thought. First the form, later the philosophy. Perhaps their subconscious mind, by which I mean the collective unconscious, is evolving and complexifying, acting as a kind of spur to their ordinary consciousness. I'm sure there's a rich oral tradition amongst all the warbles." She glanced regretfully at Carl. "After all, they twitter enough. Yet maybe they also experience a sort of *angst* at emerging from nature—a loss of instinctual, prelapsarian animal paradise—and deflect this *angst* by embodying and even celebrating such anxieties as environment. Maybe, Peter, that's your answer."

Maybe. Her words sounded more eloquently convincing than they ever could in the clipped speed-talk of the info-swap, where they might shrink into gibberish.

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Thought Peter: if I tried to move closer to Mary emotionally and sensually, she would have a theory about this too. But then, so had he, hadn't he? He felt a sudden urge to sculpt Mary nude, lascivious, flaunting. Not as a gross exemplar of lust; as an indicator of joy instead. Joy, yes, liberating joy! An explosion of joy which might coat him with dust, however, a joy which might petrify him. No, he wanted to go beyond that, to mold an image which simply stood for itself alone and did not represent any moral catechisms or theory of behavior.

In his mind's eye he watched Mary fill a pewter tankard full of foaming, heady beer for him, then a second tankard for herself, thus to wash the dust from his throat, from his bloodstream, from his hairy, Pan-like, goaty loins.

But where was the spare, blank, unoccupied stone waiting to be sculpted?

Oh here and there, here and there. By no means everywhere. Still, not every niche and nook had been filled.

An unsculpted pillar rose in a yard. Visualize, chiseled from it: *Alien Woman*. Alien to the lemur inhabitants, that's to say.

"I don't follow you," said Carl. "There must be some particular environmental pressure to evolve—to which they're adapting—mustn't there be? Not a mental pressure from within, a dream-pressure. You're almost saying that they evolve spontaneously."

Mary grinned. "Maybe that's my romantic side showing." Her smile encompassed Peter, Peter more than Carl. So perhaps, thought Peter, she was beginning to realize, and her talk of dreams meant . . . He suspected he could only ever express himself fully not in simple stone but in smooth, rich, aristocratic marble. He might return from this expedition metamorphosed into a sculptor rather than a mason. His hands itched.

They entered a square flanked with hieroglyphicals. These were figures which seemed to bespeak or riddle out some special symbolism above and beyond the ordinary grotesque; some one-to-one meaning, if only you could decode it. Many of the figures were related to one another by a gesture, a glance, even by physical connections in the shape of a stone chain looping from belly to belly . . . maybe that was an umbilical cord.

A stone fish-lemur—lemur with fins and tail—poised as if diving, one hand clamped over its nose. Two distorted lemurs who were fused together, their twin trunks branching from shared monstrous legs, wrestled for possession of a stone knife—to cut themselves apart? to hack off the rival claimant, amputate him? Another figure jutted up with arms outstretched, one hand clutching a stone hoe like a trident, stone wings bursting from its back as though it would take flight into the sky.

With its bare hands a fourth figure ripped open a hole, a grinning

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mouth, in its belly. This one's neighbor had shrunk into a wizened ball mostly, yet one single giant arm pointed dramatically . . . towards a gloomy doorway barren of any images except one, and that image not carved at all but seemingly painted or burnt (or both) upon the curved rock lintel. The daubed image was a pair of staring black-rimmed eyes, two circles side by side.

Their guide had gestured and twittered at them to stay in the square, and had run off. Initially they had been more interested in scrutinizing and taking holos of the hieroglyphicals. Only as she returned, carrying some stiff and still steaming purple root vegetable on which she alternately blew and chewed, did they notice that sign above the doorway—to which the lunching lemur trotted, and where she squatted down.

"A sign!" exclaimed Carl. "God, it's the first graffito we've seen. The first genuine arbitrary symbol. Two circles touching, like our sign for infinity, eh? I'm sure it's painted. The first piece of written language?"

"Lemur eyes," Mary said. "That's what it shows. As a warning? Dark inside. Doesn't open out and brighten? No, why should they warn of darkness—with their eyesight?"

"What we assume about their eyesight," Carl corrected. "Can't test them out like animals, can we? Damned if we will!"

Yet even so. Big eyes. At night spy-cams usually showed activity in the city. The lemurs had fire but this seemed restricted to cookery. No natives carried brands to light their way nor did flambeaux illuminate any of their living zones.

"Maybe it means, 'Look in here.' " Carl unclipped a flashlight, shone the beam down a plunge of broad shallow steps which didn't appear to be made of stone.

"Hey! Door against the wall!" He leaned to rap with his knuckles. "Bottle-wood door. Or an upended sledge."

He was standing above the lemur. Gulping the last of her veg, she twittered up at him. He frowned in concentration.

"Children. Run. Hide? I can't understand."

Peter felt resentful of that sign. If it was a sign at all, it wasn't inscribed in his own language, of stone.

Carl leaned again to shine his light down those steps. The lemur rose, blinking. Briefly Peter was convinced that the native was attacking Carl in protest at the phenomenon of the torch, for she grabbed hold of Carl's tunic and began scrambling up him. Before Carl could do more than squeak loudly in surprise she was touching the sign above the door.

"Stay still!" called Mary. "Don't dislodge her!"

With sharp little teeth the lemur bit at her own thumb till it bled freely, a rich scarlet flow. In blood she painted around the outline of the sign till her wound coagulated. Then she leapt free from Carl, jerked her

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hurt thumb at the open doorway, warbled what might have been a farewell, and scuttled away.

It was thus that they found the catacombs.

"Catacombs" was Peter's description, although Mary soon pointed out that there did not seem to be any corpses or bones anywhere in the extensive series of corridors and little chambers underneath that part of the city. The whole complex, steps included, was scooped out of firm clay, not cut through rock, and it was empty apart from numerous open doors of bottle-wood, none of which possessed any type of hinge.

"It's a burrow," said Mary. "Evidently they were never arboreal animals, like Earth lemurs! They were burrowing creatures. That's why they have the apparent nocturnal adaptation of such big eyes—it was to see underground. This is the Ur-burrow. The original, basic burrow over which they later built the city."

"Rock *upon* clay?" Peter asked skeptically. He felt consumed with claustrophobia as their flashlights played upon yet more tight corridors and empty little cells, all lemur-size. They were being forced to stoop. Oh to be high on a spire in the open air, settling a block into its new resting place of centuries, a block rampant with an eagle's head. The air down in these, yes, catacombs smelt stale and dank.

Nor were there any gargoyles or lapids or demons. Nothing carved whatever. No stone. To Peter's mind the place was worse than empty. It was meaningless, and he feared that somehow he was losing Mary here as she spun her new theory of how the natives had originally burrowed like rabbits.

"And then they emerged from the soil, from chthonic Nature, into light and consciousness and creativity!"

"Where are the tools?" he asked, and he remembered William Blake's poem. "What the mallet, what the chisel?"

Were these really doors, loose doors, down here—when there were no doors in the city up above—or were they simply surplus sledges, stored against a mammoth harvest or retired from service?

When Mary snapped holopics the tiny chambers were blindingly illuminated. The after-dim, while his eyes readjusted to torchlight, was terrible to Peter's heart.

At the info-swap that evening Mary reported a great discovery which should quite trump Fremantle's coup concerning the natural origin of agricultural tools. A whole new subterranean layer of significance had been laid bare. A biological Troy: the original habitat. Doubtless it should be a source of chagrin to the biologist that she had found this out whilst he had been haring about in the forest, barking up trees, breaking up

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trees. For a little while, the burrow even seemed to diminish the city of statuary, to thrust it into the shade, as though that hole in the ground could be more important.

"Definitely not for burial purposes?" demanded Ash. "Even in previous epochs?"

"Most unlikely," replied Mary. "Not abandoned. Kept in repair. Using, um, bottle-wood implements. Otherwise collapse eventually. Besides, entrance marked with life-blood sign, constantly renewed. Ritually. Here is the root, the racial birth."

Fremantle said, "You think lemur fingers adapted to *burrow?* Ha!"

Before Mary could field this thrust, Leo Allen was saying, "Seems like war-shelter to me. Refuge from enemies."

"No, no. When we landed, lemurs didn't hide. Not threat-conscious."

"Carvings could have fooled me," said Allen. "Where metal sculpting tools, incidentally? If not hidden down burrow?"

"Maybe *buried* there, below ground. If so, appropriate place, culturally. Symmetric, linked inversely. City opposite of burrow, stone opposite of soil."

"Fieldtrip there tomorrow?" suggested Allen. "With metal detectors?"

"Yes," said Ash. "Everdon, take Allen, Fremantle, and Ramirez."

Peter had no wish to join in this expedition to the oppressive, meaningless warren. Let slick Fremantle and crony Ramirez spoil Mary's day for her, so that she would come back into the upper world of rock-art away from envy and barbed malice feeling stifled, needing Peter's . . . solidity, craving significance and warmth.

If Leo Allen's detectors uncovered any concealed chisels, Peter couldn't be more pleased. However, he had no wish to be present and couldn't really credit Mary's "symmetric" argument. The following day would be better employed in company with Lipmann, who himself had no conceivable reason to descend again into that voiceless collection of wormholes in the clay.

Almost shunning Mary, Peter went directly back to his hutch to sleep. Before shuttering the window for the night he stared out at one of the little moons hanging full, bone-white, over the forest. The two moons of Rock orbited at different speeds in differently tilted planes. He could almost see that moon moving, but then a solitary cloud consumed the satellite so that its light diffused and swelled into a glowing amoebic blob. The pure circular stone of the moon had melted into shapeless, meaningless menace.

Leo Allen found no metal hidden in the burrow, though after his tour of inspection he was still inclined to the shelter idea, with reservations.

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"Yearly insect swarms? Like killer bees, lethal locusts?" he suggested the following evening. "Small, but many and deadly."

Ramirez reported tersely at speed on the local analogues of insects, rodents, and riverine reptiles. To Peter's ears she sounded like a twittering lemur herself.

"Quick plagues of pseudo-mice," she gabbled. "Behave like lemmings every few years, maybe develop toxic bite?"

"Need food storage," said Allen. "Burrow not stocked."

"Innocuous-seeming species undergoes startling life-cycle metamorphosis? Like caterpillar into moth?"

"Lemurs still intelligent to *build* shelter," Mary argued optimistically. "Memory of past, concept of future."

"Is hibernating tortoise intelligent?" called out Fremantle.

"Actually," added Allen, "shelter not spacious enough for more than quarter of estimated population."

"Therefore *original* home," said Mary, "before population rose."

"Lingo?" asked Ash, and Carl reported quickly on the frustrating day he had spent with Peter.

"Requires much work, back home. Breakthrough by next expedition, yes. If true language."

Ash raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Masonry?" she enquired. A titter ran round the refectory, originating near Ramirez.

"Twin-circle sign not found in carvings," Peter confessed.

"Are you blind?" heckled Fremantle. "Image of lemur *eyes*!"

"Not necessarily." Though what else?

"If burrow shelter from perceived threat," said Allen, "mount more survey cams in city for when *M* lights up tomorrow? Suppose Anthro records behavior vicinity shelter?"

Mary sat on Peter's bunk, as he had hoped she might.

"What a wretched day."

"Yes." He agreed sympathetically, gladly. "I'm afraid my carvings are no Rosetta stone, as yet."

Why should he be afraid? He thought of the hieroglyphicals he had restored in one Oxford college, hieroglyphicals inspired by the medieval bestiary representing desire, timidity, moroseness. He wanted to touch Mary, hold her, mold her, tumble her in bed. Yet he couldn't. Didn't know how. Couldn't read her signals, which weren't carved in stone but enciphered in flesh; couldn't transmit his own signals to her adequately, hieroglyphically.

His fear was deeper, obscure, indefinable, as though the lemur burrow was some nightmare area of himself which he had been forced reluctantly

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to enter. As yet nothing had been found, no final truth or ultimate idol, either glorious or evil. Why should the locus of nightmare be down there when blatant nightmares capered in full grotesquery along all the lanes of the city? To return to the courtyard of the . . . *evil eyes,* the very next evening, as he must now do in company with Carl and Mary, scared him in a way that no summit of any spire or tower height had ever done. A vertigo of the dark cramped depths afflicted him.

"Mary."

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

Damned timidity!

"That's to say, tell me about yourself, Mary, will you?"

"But you already know. We know each other's bios."

"Yes, but a person is not a biography." His own contained nothing about pints of ale or about a certain barmaid who consoled a certain farmer, who happened not to be as strapped for cash as other local farmers because he had seen the future and had roofed his fields over early with filtering, humidifying, climate-control film.

"Any more than a tribe of aliens is a smarty-pants ethno-report? Is that what you're implying?"

Had he inadvertently opened a door to some hollow which haunted her? The most insightful of social maps (of one's own well-planned life, too!) was not the actual untidy paradoxical territory.

"What should I tell you, Peter? Of times when I made a fool of myself? Times when I became obsessed? Times of confusion? My favorite foods? My favorite *fantasies*?"

Yes, those, he thought.

"Never mind," he said. "Look at the moon." (Which was over the river, streaking out a silver snake.) "Its side's being shaved off by the sculptor of the night."

She stared at him intently. Was her stare a signal? He didn't know.

She said, "It should still be almost full tomorrow evening. And it's past our bedtime, if we're to be wise owls *then*."

For that night of nights Leo Allen had done the observers proud. His own team, consisting of himself and Carl, team two, namely Fremantle and Ramirez, and team three, Mary and Peter, as well as being in audio contact with each other, with the base, and with *Michelangelo,* had multi-channel video links with all the survey cams, which were equipped for infrared in case of dark cloud. In the event the sky was clear; starlight and moonlight sugared the city.

Since the workers were all home from the fields, the full complement of population was inside the city. Many were asleep, but others wandered

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about twittering so that the lanes and yards and rooms seemed just as crowded—or uncrowded—as by day.

"Fusion minus one hundred seconds," counted a radio voice. The glint of the orbiting voidship should be in sight any moment.

"Allen here. It'll look as though that moon has given birth to another moon. As though the other moon has jumped right around the sky to just beside it."

"Fremantle. Birth of myth, maybe? Like Velikovsky's Bible?" A sneer in his voice.

Peter swept his flashlight beam above the doorway of the burrow. Two eyes, of dried blood, stared blackly. In panic he thumbed his com.

"Catlow here. Commander! *Michelangelo!* Don't light the fusion torch. Abort!"

"Sixty seconds."

"I've realized what the sign means, Commander. It isn't eyes at all. It's the two full moons nearly in conjunction, before the closer one eclipses the other. When they're side by side in the sky, *something happens!* How often does that occur?"

A voice he didn't recognize, from *M:* "Every thirty-one years, local."

"Thirty seconds."

"She's in sight."

"For heaven's sake don't light that torch till we've worked this out!"

"Everdon here," said Mary. "Agree Catlow. Unwarrantable cultural tampering."

"Fremantle. Good experiment. Trigger programmed behavior. Demonstrate existence of."

"No!" cried Peter.

"Fifteen seconds."

"Take stonemason's word? Navigate voidship by hammer and chisel?" A woman. Who? Ramirez?

"Please, Ash!"

"Protest noted."

In the sky—to all appearances right next to the moon, though actually fifty thousand kilometers closer—the fusion torch of the voidship ignited, the torch that could accelerate *Michelangelo* to hyperphase. The light seemed to expand to the size of that moon.

Around the yard hieroglyphicals strained at the leash of that new luminosity as if about to dive, to fly, to wrestle, to rip themselves open. Of a sudden the night was loud with the warbling and twittering of what could have been thousands of startled birds.

Lemurs flooded into the yard. Females clutching squealing babies, males hauling youngsters along, they jammed through that doorway of the double eye (ah no, of the double *moon*), plunging down into darkness.

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Peter was buffeted, pulled by the river of bodies all crowding towards one goal.

"Hey," from the radio, "cat among the pigeons! They really got the wind up!"

No, it wasn't lemur hands which were pulling Peter along now. It was Mary, urging him.

"Must see what goes on down there!"

Peter heard himself moan. All those bodies packing into that close, dark catacomb! But he couldn't escape the pressure. Their torchbeams jerked about as Mary and he stumbled, crouching, down the hard clay stairs, and into one of the chambers. This cell was already half full. As the two humans piled in, panting, lemurs wrestled the bottle-wood door shut behind them, firmly. The door fitted tight against the clay rim, and the lemur commissionaires withdrew, apparently satisfied that those still surging past down the corridor outside wouldn't attempt to force entry.

Now all of the lemurs calmed. They sat and settled, even the youngest. The presence of the big humans with their lights and videocom and chattering radio voices seemed immaterial. No sound of lemur feet outside, not any more.

"Christ!" Radio voice. "What a bloody dust storm!" Allen?

"Dust? The whole place is *smoking*." That was certainly Carl.

"Can't see a thing—"

As Mary tuned the videocom it was plain that all the survey cams had gone to infrared. Distorted bright images of lemurs staggered through a fog. Gargoyles, babewyns, walls were exhaling thick pink clouds through all their microscopic stone pores. Images of lemurs, surely out of focus, clung to stonework, crouched, climbed, engaged in strange acrobatics.

"Whole city hidden." Chang's voice, from the base. "Leave if possible."

"Allen, Security. Guard mask integrity. Grab cams to point way. Hold vid-screens to eyes. See in infrared. Keep lenses *cleaned*."

"Coated in the damn stuff. My scalp's itching like crazy—"

Why did lemurs on screen look so contorted? Why were they moving in sluggish slow motion? Why was that one climbing up a pillar?

"Patel." She was back in base. "Entire fabric of city is releasing spores, billions of spores. Like fungus, puffballs."

"Ash here. More like spawning coral. Synchronously, once yearly in old days all along Australia's Barrier Reef. Viewed this on vacation when child. Triggered by temperature and tidal cues—and by full moonlight! City may be social organism. Colony of microorganisms. Air reef. Reef in air, not sea. Comment, Fremantle?"

"Busy." A cough.

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Peter spoke. "Triggered by double moon. The semblance of. The moon and Michelangelo. Together."

"Ash here. Catlow?"

Mary reported, "Everdon and Catlow in burrow, see channel twenty. Lemurs took refuge. Shut doors tight. Thus some survivors. But of what?"

"Of *that,* Mary!" Peter jabbed a finger at the little screen. Though the image was doubly foggy due to the coating on the cam lens it was still possible to see one lemur backed up against a pillar, shaggy with spores. The native's mouth was gaping wide, its neck was arching. Its penis had burst forth from the furry sheath, stiffened, crusty, and huge. The lemur was in process of becoming a hieroglyphical of rutting lust. While it clung, backward, to that pillar, its legs bent up away from the ground, shrinking, contracting, and edging it higher and higher in concert with its cruelly twisted arms, till it stopped and hung as if cemented.

"Natives turning into monsters!" they heard. "It's goddam Halloween."

"Itchy—"

"Don't scratch—"

"Protein incompatibility," said Chang. "Should not affect humans. But recommend detox and quarantine."

"My leg's *stiff*—!"

A scream . . . of panic? Whose panic?

"They don't *make* the statues, Mary," Peter said. "They *become* the statues. And the rest of the fabric! They never built this city. Generations of their bodies have fused into it. As Ash says!—coral reefs in air! Nourished by night-soil and cooking water chucked over it. And at sporing time the coral organisms coat the lemurs, turn them into more reef."

"But the lemurs are altering so grotesquely. . . ."

"Yes! The spores take their bodies over. Metamorphose them—according to the lemurs' own, I don't know, archetypal emotions, passions, instinct programs."

"And thus they rejoin Nature." She mused. "But they don't run away to live in the woods. Instead they rely on a burrow that'll save enough survivors to let the race continue. They probably breed quite fast. Thirty-odd years will be time enough to repopulate, and more. But they don't try to escape their destiny. It's the only thing that gives them culture, cities." The voices of teams one and two were just grunty now, or ghastly. Chang was talking.

"Control by chemical signals in air. Coral is architect. Maybe influences shape of bottle-trees too? We make anthropomorphic error. Assume lemurs dominant because resemble us. Instead, part of symbiotic system."

"That's it," Mary said to Peter, "symbiosis." Of a sudden she looked desperately sad. "It isn't Cultural Anthro at all, it's Bio. Plain beastly biology."

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Chang said, "Lemurs nourish coral, are periodically incorporated, used to manufacture more coral mass. Lemurs benefit by shelter, tools, agric with which to nourish coral—and their thoughts given form and substance, reinforcing programs governing lemurs."

"They must give their bodies to their God," murmured Mary.

"Coral true intelligence here," chanted Chang. "Bio-engineering, eh, Fremantle? Down on molecular level."

Silence from Fremantle.

"Can transmute body elements. Can unwind and rewind cells, reproducing self throughout microscopically. Affect humans too. But intelligence impenetrable as stone. Not intelligence in our sense. Fooled by fusion-flare."

A groan from the radio, as of some material stretching, splitting, then hardening.

"How long will the air down here last?" wondered Mary.

The native refugees in the cell were almost comatose by now, hardly moving or reacting despite the noise and light produced by two guests. In other cells Peter could imagine total inertness. Thus to conserve oxygen. That, too, must be part of the program. In this case, of racial survival. For the good of the city, the benefit of the coral.

"Long enough," he said, "if we weren't here. Compared with them we're gobbling oxy."

Michelangelo was radioing worried enquiries.

"City still sporing," by way of answer. "Could go on all night. Probable loss, four personnel. Two more sheltering down sealed burrow."

"Abort grand tour? Circle moon, return to Rock orbit?"

"Negative," said Ash. "Base in no danger. Future fieldwork, body recovery, wearing protective suits."

Peter murmured, "They're going to hack Fremantle and Co out of the coral? Wonder what they became. . . ."

At that moment the hieroglyphical basis of lemur life and society came clear to him—or seemed to come clear to him; the way in which these furry beings were revealed to themselves at last in a transcendent moment of understanding, a peak of consciousness at the time when the spores coated and invaded, transmuted and petrified them and sealed them into the substance of their city in rampant caricature, in emblem which at first sight seemed monstrous but which was not necessarily so.

Plain biology, indeed! What was the word which he'd heard Mary use in derision?

Reductionism, that was it. The reduction of wonderfully patterned complexity down to an elementary jiggle of chemical reactions. The reduction of dream to electrochemical programs, of vision and passion down to the vibration of molecules.

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Peter knew that he must determine his own dominant category of being, his primal humor, in the eternal rock root of his own existence.

Timidity, covetousness, envy, lust? Or loving joy, or patience, or some other of the virtues?

Was this not also a sort of reduction . . .?

He remembered the words of a long-dead French poet, Saint-Jean Perse, which he had once committed to memory. *On ne bavarde pas sur la pierre. . . .* You don't gossip on stone. You don't babble, or ramble on. Reduce your meaning to its essentials.

"I'm going up top," he told Mary. "I can't stand it down here. It's squeezing me. Up, and out."

"You'd die! Masks don't protect us. And you'd let the spores in!"

"Plenty of doors. Close this one tight behind me—unless you'd rather come as well?"

She shuddered. "Peter, you're committing suicide. You'll *die*."

"No I shan't. I'll become eternal. Archetypal. I've come so many light years, Mary, to meet myself. How could I ship back to Earth as a surplus artisan, a joke, when I could *become* what my whole life has been aimed at? Promise you won't let them hack me out of the city. Don't let them cart me home in a specimen bag. Promise!"

"Look, we've had a set-back, you and me, but isn't what we've found just as fascinating?"

"Oh yes indeed." He handed his com-set to her. "It sets the dream free, to shape the self for ever."

"Sets it *free*? You'd be locked in an alien coral reef. It mightn't even be able to cope with you. Different codings, alien ones. The lemurs would throw crap and veg water in your face."

"Promise you won't let them take me back!"

"Yes. If they'll listen to me." She sounded deeply scared now, which he regretted.

"Make them listen for once. Tell them how they ought to have listened to me about *M* and the moon. Tell them I hope to communicate with the coral by offering myself to it, but it'll take until the next sporing for any effects to show. Yes, tell them *that*. And tell them: *transmutation* of protein into rock! What wouldn't Earth give for the knack of altering the molecular structure of rock into protein?" Even if certain farmers, who had bedded barmaids, lost their investment.

"I won't say good-bye, since you'll see me again." Stuffing his torch temporarily under his armpit, Peter clawed at the clay to release the bottle-wood door. This popped free, and he slipped quickly into the corridor, which looked clear of motes. "Push it tight!"

No sign of lemurs, either. Doors behind him blocked cells. The stairs

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ahead mounted to the door of two-moons, which was shut. He ascended, crouching.

He unpeeled the top door, dodged out, tugged the barrier shut behind him as best he could. Now his torchlight yellowed a dense fog. He couldn't see a single object in the yard of hieroglyphicals; however, he thought he recalled a convenient gap between two neighboring grotesques roughly in *that* direction. He soon collided with hard lumps, barely visible. Turning, backing between those lumps and another set of lumps an arm's distance away, he met relative smoothness.

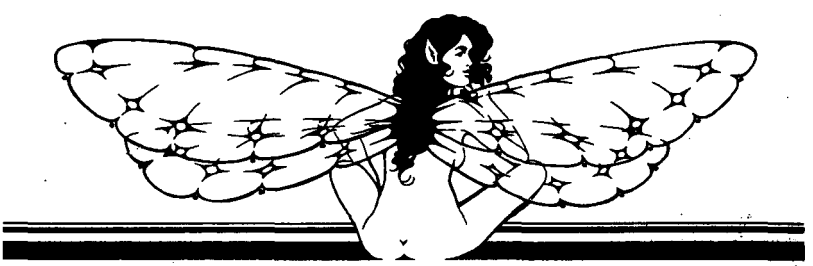
Not all lemurs would become hieroglyphicals or gargoyles or babewyns. By no means! Many lemurs must simply crunch up to become supporting blocks, sections of wall or pillar, part of fabric rather than design. The ordinary bedrock of society, those! Whereas he, Peter from another planet, was unusual? Outstanding? Or perhaps those types were the more perfect, Platonic specimens.

He ripped off his mask, breathed deep, and almost choked. But already a hot (yes, itchy) exaltation coursed through his veins and nerves.

Thoughts sped through his mind, a riot of images trying to dovetail and achieve a unified solid pattern, to array themselves like a squad on parade.

He didn't care about his discomfort. Even, agony? Vaguely he was aware that parts of himself were being warped and twisted. However, he was opiated, his pain centers disconnected. Only terror had made that radio voice scream.

What of Mary? What of that barmaid? Who were they, compared with the centuries? His devotion was to stone. He aspired to be a spire. He stretched up and up. And he knew the sublime. ●



NEXT ISSUE

We have an unusual treat coming up in November, something that's a first for *IAsfm*, and something that we think will turn out to be one of the most talked-about publishing events of the year. For our

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November cover story is **Harlan Ellison's** monumental and long-awaited screenplay, *I, Robot: The Movie,* which we will run as a three-part serial, its first-ever publication, starting next issue. Now, *IAsfm* has never published a *screenplay* before—and probably never will *again,* either—and this may strike some of you as a screwy thing to do; and, indeed, it was a chance we hesitated over before taking. But *this* is no ordinary screenplay... in the years since Harlan was hired to write *this* one, his own special personal interpretation of **Isaac Asimov's** famous novel *I, Robot,* this screenplay has become the stuff of legends. A cult item, in fact, one of the most eagerly sought-after and feverishly speculated-about Lost Works in science fiction history; last year, bootleg Xeroxes of the screenplay were reportedly selling to collectors for sums in excess of $5,000 apiece. Harlan is recognized as one of the modern masters of this demanding form, and (in addition to his many Hugo and Nebula awards) is a three-time winner of the prestigious Writers' Guild of America Award for Most Outstanding Teleplay. But *I, Robot: The Movie* is quite likely the best screenplay that Harlan has ever written, tough, angry, hard-edged, deeply compassionate. This is probably as close as you're ever going to come to reading a novel-length collaboration between Harlan Ellison and Isaac Asimov—Isaac's unique vision of future history filtered through Harlan's pungent and equally unique sensibilities, the material being shaped and changed and mutated in the process, until we are left with a totally *new* and original work: a life of Susan Calvin, but Susan Calvin as no one has ever seen her before. The opening installment of the serialization will also be accompanied by fascinating and never-before published articles by both Harlan and Isaac, giving us a behind-the-scenes look at the problems of translating a special book into a special movie (one that will probably never be filmed, though, alas).

Let me emphasize the unique nature of this event. There may well never *be* another publication of *I, Robot: The Movie,* at any other time, in any other form. If you don't read it here, you may never read it at all. And this is one you don't want to miss.

Also in November: **Susan Palwick** returns with what might be her best story yet, a taut, hard-edged, and chilling look at the gritty underside of a classic fairy tale in "Ever After"; **Charles de Lint** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a fast and furious tour through an oddly surreal California inhabited by some *very* odd Californians, in "Uncle Dobbin's Parrot Fair"; new writer **Dean Whitlock** takes us out on the back roads and down some eerie country byways in *his IAsfm* debut, the suspenseful "Roadkill"; **Lewis and Edith Shiner** give us a thoroughly nasty and unabashedly controversial look at some possible future trends in recreation, in "Six Flags over Jesus"; and **James Patrick Kelly** returns to these pages with an eloquent story about an ordinary man whose dreams come to be troubled with some very out-of-the-ordinary visions of "Heroics." Look for our November issue on sale on your newsstands on September 22, 1987.

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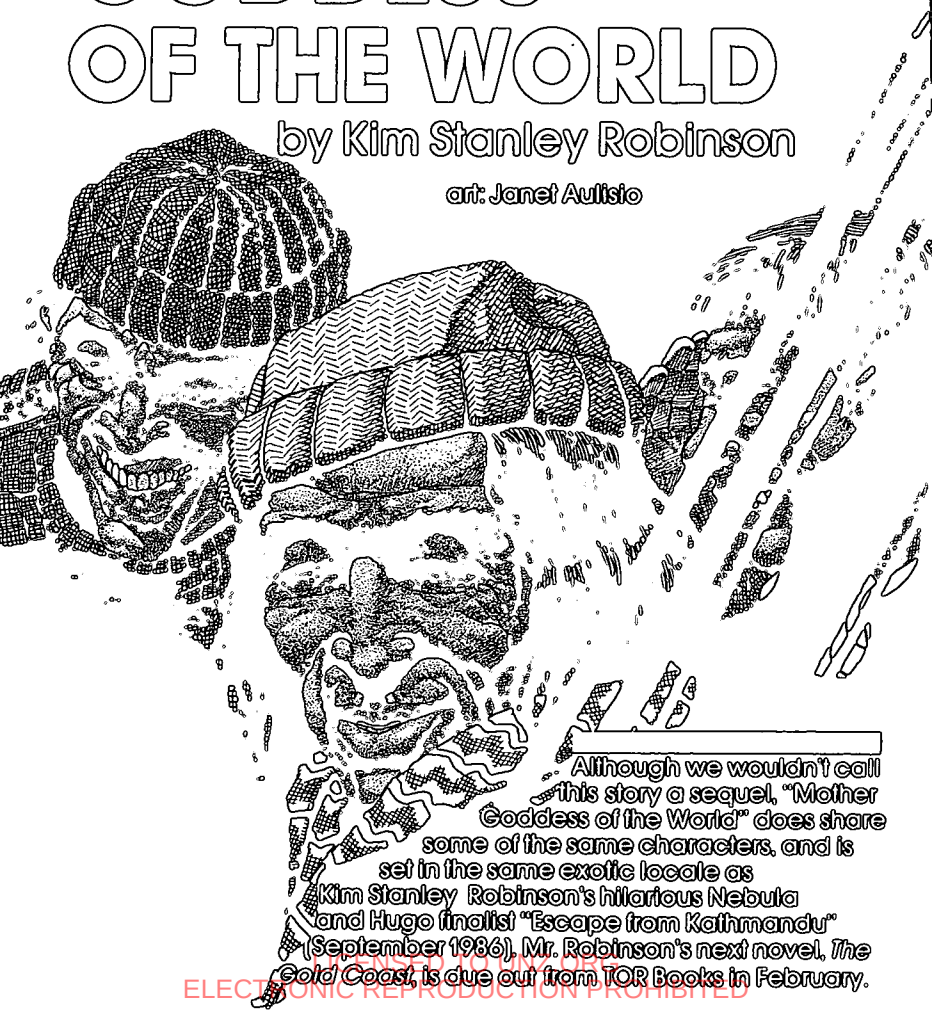
MOTHER GODDESS OF THE WORLD

by Kim Stanley Robinson

art: Janet Aulisio



Although we wouldn't call this story a sequel, "Mother Goddess of the World" does share some of the same characters, and is set in the same exotic locale as Kim Stanley Robinson's hilarious Nebula and Hugo finalist "Escape from Kathmandu" (September 1986). Mr. Robinson's next novel, *The Gold Coast*, is due out from TOR Books in February.

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I

My life started to get weird again the night I ran into Freds Fredericks, near Chimoa, in the gorge of the Dudh Kosi. I was guiding a trek at the time, and was very happy to see Freds. He was traveling with another climber, a Tibetan by the name of Kunga Norbu, who appeared to speak little English except for "Good morning," which he said to me as Fred introduced us, even though it was just after sunset. My trekking group was settled into their tents for the night, so Freds and Kunga and I headed for the cluster of teahouses tucked into the forest by the trail. We looked in them; two had been cleaned up for trekkers, and the third was a teahouse in the old style, frequented only by porters. We ducked into that one.

It was a single low room; we had to stoop not only under the beams that held up the slate roof, but also under the smoke layer. Old style country buildings in Nepal do not have chimneys, and the smoke from their wood stoves just goes up to the roof and collects there in a very thick layer, which lowers until it begins to seep out under the eaves. Why the Nepalis don't use chimneys, which I would have thought a fairly basic invention, is a question no one can answer; it is yet another Great Mystery of Nepal.

Five wooden tables were occupied by Rawang and Sherpa porters, sprawled on the benches. At one end of the room the stove was crackling away. Flames from the stove and a hissing Coleman lantern provided the light. We said Namaste to all the staring Nepalis, and ducked under the smoke to sit at the table nearest the stove, which was empty.

We let Kunga Norbu take care of the ordering, as he had more Nepali than Freds or me. When he was done the Rawang stove keepers giggled and went to the stove, and came back with three huge cups of Tibetan tea.

I complained to Freds about this in no uncertain terms. "Damn it, I thought he was ordering chang!"

Tibetan tea, you see, is not your ordinary Lipton's. To make it they start with a black liquid that is not made from tea leaves at all but from some kind of root, and it is so bitter you could use it for suturing. They pour a lot of salt into this brew, and stir it up, and then they dose it liberally with rancid yak butter, which melts and floats to the top.

Actually it tastes worse than it sounds. I have developed a strategy for dealing with the stuff whenever I am offered a cup; I look out the nearest window, and water the plants with it. As long as I don't do it too fast and get poured a second cup, I'm fine. But here I couldn't do that, because twenty-odd pairs of laughing eyes were staring at us.

Kunga Norbu was hunched over the table, slurping from his cup and

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going "ooh," and "ahh," and saying complimentary things to the stove keepers. They nodded and looked closely at Freds and me, big grins on their faces.

Freds grabbed his cup and took a big gulp of the tea. He smacked his lips like a wine taster. "Right on," he said, and drained the cup down. He held it up to our host. "More?" he said, pointing into the cup.

The porters howled. Our host refilled Freds's cup and he slurped it down again, smacking his lips after every swallow. I held my nose to get down a sip, and they thought that was funny too.

So we were in tight with the teahouse crowd, and when I asked for chang they brought over a whole bucket of it. We poured it into the little chipped teahouse glasses and went to work on it.

"So what are you and Kunga Norbu up to?" I asked Freds.

"Well," he said, and a funny expression crossed his face. "That's kind of a long story, actually."

"So tell it to me."

He looked uncertain. "It's too long to tell tonight."

"What's this? A story too long for Freds Fredericks to tell? Impossible, man, why I once heard you summarize the Bible to Laure, and it only took you a minute."

Freds shook his head. "It's longer than that."

"I see." I let it go, and the three of us kept on drinking the chang, which is a white beer made from rice or barley. We drank a lot of it, which is a dangerous proposition on several counts, but we didn't care. As we drank we kept slumping lower over the table to try and get under the smoke layer, and besides we just naturally felt like slumping at that point. Eventually we were laid out like mud in a puddle.

Freds kept conferring with Kunga Norbu in Tibetan, and I got curious. "Freds, you hardly speak a word of Nepali, how is it you know so much Tibetan?"

"I spent a couple years in Tibet, a long time ago. I was studying in one of the Buddhist lamaseries there."

"*You* studied in a Buddhist lamasery in Tibet?"

"Yeah sure! Can't you tell?"

"Well . . . " I waved a hand. "I guess that might explain it."

"That was where I met Kunga Norbu, in fact. He was my teacher."

"I thought he was a climbing buddy."

"Oh he is! He's a climbing lama. Actually there's quite a number of them. See when the Chinese invaded Tibet they closed down all the lamaseries, destroyed most of them in fact. The monks had to go to work, and the lamas either slipped over to Nepal, or moved up into mountain caves. Then later the Chinese wanted to start climbing mountains as propaganda efforts; to show the rightness of the thoughts of Chairman

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Mao. The altitude in the Himalayas was a little bit much for them, though, so they mostly used Tibetans, and called them Chinese. And the Tibetans with the most actual mountain experience turned out to be Buddhist lamas, who had spent a lot of time in really high, isolated retreats. Eight of the nine so-called Chinese to reach the top of Everest in 1975 were actually Tibetans."

"Was Kunga Norbu one of them?"

"No. Although he wishes he was, let me tell you. But he did go pretty high on the North Ridge in the Chinese expedition of 1980. He's a really strong climber. And a great guru too, a really holy guy."

Kunga Norbu looked across the table at me, aware that we were talking about him. He was short and skinny, very tough looking, with long black hair. Like a lot of Tibetans, he looked almost exactly like a Navaho or Apache Indian. When he looked at me I got a funny feeling; it was as if he was staring right through me to infinity. Or somewhere equally distant. No doubt lamas cultivate that look.

"So what are you two doing up here?" I asked, a bit uncomfortable.

"We're going to join my Brit buddies, and climb Lingtren. Should be great. And then Kunga and I might try a little something on our own."

We found we had finished off the bucket of chang, and we ordered another. More of that and we became even lower than mud in a puddle.

Suddenly Kunga Norbu spoke to Freds, gesturing at me. "Really?" Freds said, and they talked some more. Finally Freds turned to me. "Well, this is a pretty big honor, George. Kunga wants me to tell you who he really is."

"Very nice of him," I said. I found that with my chin on the table I had to move my whole head to speak.

Freds lowered his voice, which seemed to me unnecessary as we were the only two people in the room who spoke English. "Do you know what a tulku is, George?"

"I think so," I said. "Some of the Buddhist lamas up here are supposed to be reincarnated from earlier lamas, and they're called tulkus, right? The abbot at Tengboche is supposed to be one."

Freds nodded. "That's right." He patted Kunga Norbu on the shoulder. "Well, Kunga here is also a tulku."

"I see." I considered the etiquette of such a situation, but couldn't really figure it, so finally I just scraped my chin off the table and stuck my hand across it. Kunga Norbu took it and shook, with a brief, modest smile.

"I'm serious," Freds said.

"Hey!" I said. "Did I say you weren't serious?"

"No. But you don't believe it, do you."

"I believe that you believe it, Freds."

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"He really is a tulku! I mean I've seen proof of it, I really have. His *ku kongma,* which means his first incarnation, was as Naropa, a very important Tibetan lama born in 1555. The monastery at Kum-Bum is located on the site of his birth."

I nodded, at a loss for words. Finally I filled up our little cups, and we toasted Kunga Norbu's age. He could definitely put down the chang like he had had lifetimes of practice. "So," I said, calculating. "He's about four hundred and thirty-one."

"That's right. And he's had a hard time of it, I'll tell you. The Chinese tore down Kum-Bum as soon as they took over, and unless the monastery there is functioning again, Naropa can never escape being a disciple. See, even though he is a major tulku—"

"A major tulku," I repeated, liking the sound of it.

"Yeah, even though he's a major tulku, he's still always been the disciple of an even bigger one, named Tilopa. Tilopa Lama is about as important as they come—only the Dalai Lama tops him—and Tilopa is one hard, hard guru."

I noticed that the mention of Tilopa's name made Kunga Norbu scowl, and refill his glass.

"Tilopa is so tough that the only disciple who has ever stuck with him has been Kunga here. Tilopa—when you want to become his student and you go ask him, he beats you with a stick. He'll do that for a couple of years to make sure you really want him as a teacher. And then he really puts you through the wringer. Apparently he uses the methods of the Ts'an sect in China, which are tough. To teach you the Short Path to Enlightenment he pounds you in the head with his shoe."

"Now that you mention it, he does look a little like a guy who has been pounded in the head with a shoe."

"How can he help it? He's been a disciple of Tilopa's for four hundred years, and it's always the same thing. So he asked Tilopa when he would be a guru in his own right, and Tilopa said it couldn't happen until the monastery built on Kunga's birth site was rebuilt. And he said that *that* would never happen until Kunga managed to accomplish—well, a certain task. I can't tell you exactly what the task is yet, but believe me it's tough. And Kunga used to be *my* guru, see, so he's come to ask me for some help. So that's what I'm here to do."

"I thought you said you were going to climb Lingtren with your British friends?"

"That too."

I wasn't sure if it was the chang or the smoke, but I was getting a little confused. "Well, whatever. It sounds like a real adventure."

"You're not kidding."

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Freds spoke in Tibetan to Kunga Norbu, explaining what he had said to me, I assumed. Finally Kunga replied, at length.

Freds said to me, "Kunga says you can help him too."

"I think I'll pass," I said. "I've got my trekking group and all, you know."

"Oh I know, I know. Besides, it's going to be tough. But Kunga likes you—he says you have the spirit of Milarespa."

Kunga nodded vigorously when he heard the name Milarespa, staring through me with that spacy look of his.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "But I still think I'll pass."

"We'll see what happens," Freds said, looking thoughtful.

II

Many glasses of chang later we staggered out into the night. Freds and Kunga Norbu slipped on their down jackets, and with a "Good night" and a "Good morning" they wandered off to their tent. I made my way back to my group. It felt really late, and was maybe 8:30.

As I stood looking at our tent village, I saw a light bouncing down the trail from Lukla. The man carrying the flashlight approached—it was Laure, the sirdhar for my group. He was just getting back from escorting clients back to Lukla. "Laure!" I called softly.

"Hello George," he said. "Why late now?"

"I've been drinking."

"Ah." With his flashlight pointed at the ground I could easily make out his big smile. "Good idea."

"Yeah, you should go have some chang yourself. You've had a long day."

"Not long."

"Sure." He had been escorting disgruntled clients back to Lukla all day, so he must have hiked five times as far as the rest of us. And here he was coming in by flashlight. Still, I suppose for Laure Tenzing Sherpa that did not represent a particularly tough day. As guide and yakboy he had been walking in these mountains all his life, and his calves were as big around as my thighs. Once, for a lark, he and three friends had set a record by hiking from Everest Base Camp to Kathmandu in four days; that's about two hundred miles, across the grain of some seriously uneven countryside. Compared to that today's work had been like a walk to the mailbox, I guess.

The worst part had no doubt been the clients. I asked him about them and he frowned. "People go co-op hotel, not happy. Very, very not happy. They fly back Kathmandu."

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"Good riddance," I said. "Why don't you go get some chang."

He smiled and disappeared into the dark.

I looked over the tents holding my sleeping clients and sighed.

So far it had been a typical videotrek. We had flown in to Lukla from Kathmandu, and my clients, enticed to Nepal by glossy ads promising them video Ansel Adamshood, had gone wild in the plane, rushing about banging zoom lenses together in an attempt to film everything. They were irrepressible until they saw the Lukla strip, which from the air looks like a toy model of a ski jump. Pretty quickly they were strapped in and looking like they were reconsidering their wills—all except for one tubby little guy named Arnold, who continued to roll up and down the aisle like a bowling ball, finally inserting himself into the cockpit so he could shoot over the pilots' shoulders. "We are landing at Lukla," he announced to his camera's mike in a deep fakey voice, like the narrator of a bad travelogue. "Looks impossible, but our pilots are calm."

Despite him we landed safely. Unfortunately one of our group then tried to film his own descent from the plane, and fell heavily down the steps. As I ascertained the damage—a sprained ankle—there was Arnold again, leaning over to immortalize the victim's every writhe and howl.

A second plane brought in the rest of our group, led by Laure and my assistant Heather. We started down the trail, and for a couple of hours everything went well—the trail serves as the Interstate Five of the region, and is as easy as they come. And the view is awesome—the Dudh Kosi valley is like a forested Grand Canyon, only bigger. Our group was impressed, and several of them filmed a real-time record of the day.

Then the trail descended to the banks of the Dudh Kosi river, and we got a surprise. Apparently in the last monsoon a glacial lake upstream had burst its ice dam, and rushed down in a devastating flood, tearing out the bridges, trail, trees, everything. Thus our fine interstate ended abruptly in a cliff overhanging the torn-to-shreds riverbed, and what came next was the seat-of-the-pants invention of the local porters, for whom the trail was a daily necessity. They had been clever indeed, but there really was no good alternative to the old route; so the new trail wound over strewn white boulders, traversed unstable new sand cliffs, and veered wildly up and down muddy slides that had been hacked out of dense forested walls. It was radical stuff, and even experienced trekkers were having trouble.

Our group was appalled. The ads had not mentioned this.

The porters ran ahead barefoot to reach the next tea break, and the clients began to bog down. People slipped and fell. People sat down and cried. Altitude sickness was mentioned more than once, though as a matter of fact we were not much higher than Denver. Heather and I ran

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around encouraging the weary. I found myself carrying three videocameras. Laure was carrying nine.

It was looking like the retreat from Moscow when we came to the first of the new bridges. These are pretty neat pieces of backwoods engineering; there aren't any logs in the area long enough to span the river, so they take four logs and stick them out over the river, and weigh them down with a huge pile of round stones. Then four more logs are pushed out from the other side, until their ends rest on the ends of the first four. Instant bridge. They work, but they are not confidence builders.

Our group stared at the first one apprehensively. Arnold appeared behind us and chomped an unlit cigar as he filmed the scene. "The *Death Bridge,*" he announced into his camera's mike.

"Arnold, please," I said. "Mellow out."

He walked down to the glacial gray rush of the river. "Hey, George, do you think I could take a step in to get a better shot of the crossing?"

"NO!" I stood up fast. "One step in and you'd drown, I mean look at it!"

"Well, okay."

Now the rest of the group were staring at me in horror, as if it weren't clear at first glance that to fall into the Dudh Kosi would be a very fatal error indeed. A good number of them ended up crawling across the bridge on hands and knees. Arnold got them all for posterity, and filmed his own crossing by walking in circles that made me cringe. Silently I cursed him; I was pretty sure he had known perfectly well how dangerous the river was, and only wanted to make sure everyone else did too. And very soon after that—at the next bridge, in fact—people began to demand to be taken back to Lukla. To Kathmandu. To San Francisco.

I sighed, remembering it. And remembering it was only the beginning. Just your typical Want to Take You Higher Ltd. videotrek. Plus Arnold.

III

I got another bit of Arnold in action early the next morning when I was in the rough outhouse behind the trekkers' teahouses, very hung over, crouched over the unhealthily damp hole in the floor. I had just completed my business in there when I looked up to see the big glass eye of a zoom lens, staring over the top of the wooden door at me.

"No, Arnold!" I cried, struggling to put my hand over the lens while I pulled up my pants.

"Hey, just getting some local color," Arnold said, backing away. "You know, people like to see what it's really like, the details and all, and these outhouses are really something else. Exotic."

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I growled at him. "You should have trekked in from Jiri, then. The lowland villages don't have outhouses at all."

His eyes got round, and he shifted an unlit cigar to the other side of his mouth. "What do you do, then?"

"Well, you just go outside and have a look around. Pick a spot. They usually have a shitting field down by the river. Real exotic."

He laughed. "You mean, turds everywhere?"

"Well, something like that."

"That sounds great! Maybe I'd better walk back out instead of flying."

I stared at him, wrinkling my nose. "Serious filmmaker, eh Arnold?"

"Oh, yeah. Haven't you heard of me? Arnold McConnell? I make adventure films for PBS. And sometimes for the ski resort circuit, video rentals, that kind of thing. Skiing, hang gliding, kayaking, parachuting, climbing, skateboarding—I've done them all. Didn't you ever see *The Man Who Swam Down the Zambesi?* No? Ah, that's a bit of a classic, now. One of my best."

So he had known how dangerous the Dudh Kosi was. I stared at him reproachfully. It was hard to believe he made adventure films; he looked more like the kind of Hollywood producer you'd tell couch jokes about. "So you're making a real film of this trip?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. Always working, never stop working. Workaholic."

"Don't you need a bigger crew?"

"Well sure, usually, but this is a different kind of thing, one of my 'personal diary' films I call them. I've sold a couple to PBS. Do all the work myself. It's kind of like my version of solo climbing."

"Fine. But cut the part about me taking a crap, okay?"

"Sure, sure, don't worry about it. Just got to get everything I can, you know, so I've got good tape to choose from later on. All grist for the mill. That's why I got this lens. All the latest in equipment for me. I got stuff you wouldn't believe."

"I believe."

He chomped his cigar. "Just call me Mr. Adventure."

"I will."

IV

I didn't run into Freds and Kunga Norbu in Namche Bazaar, the Sherpas' dramatically placed little capital town, and I figured they had left already with Freds's British friends. Then I kept my group there a couple of days to acclimatize, and enjoy the town, and I figured that if I caught up with them at all, it'd be up at their base camp.

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So I was quite surprised to run across the whole group in Pheriche, one of the Sherpas' high mountain villages.

Most of these villages are occupied only in the summer, to grow potatoes and pasture yaks. Pheriche, however, lies on the trekking route to Everest, so it's occupied almost year-round, and a couple of lodges have been built, along with the Himalayan Rescue Association's only aid station. It still looks like a summer pasturage: low rock walls separate potato fields, and a few slate-roofed stone huts, plus the lodges and the tin-roofed aid station. All of it is clustered at the end of a flat-bottomed glacial valley, against the side of a lateral moraine five hundred feet high. A stream meanders by and the ground is carpeted with grasses and the bright autumn red of berberi bushes. On all sides tower the fantastic white spikes of some of the world's most dramatic peaks—Ama Dablam, Taboche, Tramserku, Kang Taiga—and all in all, it's quite a place. My clients were making themselves dizzy trying to film it.

We set up our tent village in an unused potato field, and after dinner Laure and I slipped off to the Himalaya Hotel to have some chang. I entered the lodge's little kitchen and heard Freds cry, "Hey George!" He was sitting with Kunga Norbu and four Westerners; we joined them, crowding in around a little table. "These are the friends we're climbing with."

He introduced them, and we all shook hands. Trevor was a tall slender guy, with round glasses and a somewhat crazed grin. "Mad Tom," as Freds called him, was short and curly-headed, and didn't look mad at all, although something in his mild manner made me believe that he could be. John was short and compact, with a salt-and-pepper beard, and a crusher handshake. And Marion was a tall and rather attractive woman—though I suspected she might have blushed or punched you if you said so—she was attractive in a tough, wild way, with a stark strong face, and thick brown hair pulled back and braided. They were British, with the accents to prove it: Marion and Trevor quite posh and public school, and John and Mad Tom very thick and North country.

We started drinking chang, and they told me about their climb. Lingtren, a sharp peak between Pumori and Everest's West Shoulder, is serious work from any approach, and they were clearly excited about it, in their own way: "Bit of a slog, to tell the truth," Trevor said cheerfully.

When British climbers talk about climbing, you have to learn to translate it into English. "Bit of a slog" means don't go there.

"I think we ought to get lost and climb Pumori instead," said Marion. "Lingtren is a perfect *hill*."

"Marion, really."

"Can't beat Lingtren's price, anyway," said John.

He was referring to the fee that the Nepali government makes climbers

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pay for the right to climb its peaks. These fees are determined by the height of the peak to be climbed—the really big peaks are super expensive. They charge you over five thousand dollars to climb Everest, for instance, and still competition to get on its long waiting list is fierce. But some of the toughest climbs in Nepal aren't very high, relative to the biggies, and they come pretty cheap. Apparently Lingtren was one of these.

We watched the Sherpani who runs the lodge cook dinner for fifty, under the fixed gazes of the diners, who sat staring hungrily at her every move. To accomplish this she had at her command a small woodburning stove (with chimney, thank God), a pile of potatoes, noodles, rice, some eggs and cabbage, and several chang-happy porter assistants, who alternated washing dishes with breaking up chunks of yak dung for the fire. A difficult situation on the face of it, but the Sherpani was cool: she cooked the whole list of orders by memory, slicing and tossing potatoes into one pan, stuffing wood in the fire, flipping twenty pounds of noodles in mid-air like they were a single hotcake—all with the sureness and panache of an expert juggler. It was a kind of genius.

Two hours later those who had ordered the meals that came last in her strict sequence got their cabbage omelets on French fries, and the kitchen emptied out as many people went to bed. The rest of us settled down to more chang and chatter.

Then a trekker came back into the kitchen, so he could listen to his shortwave radio without bothering sleepers in the lodge's single dorm room. He said he wanted to catch the news. We all stared at him in disbelief. "I need to find out how the dollar's doing," he explained. "Did you know it dropped *eight percent* last week?"

You meet all kinds in Nepal.

Actually it's interesting to hear what you get on shortwave in the Himal, because depending on how the ionosphere is acting, almost anything will bounce in. That night we listened to the People's Voice of Syria, for instance, and some female pop singer from Bombay, which perked up the porters. Then the operator ran across the BBC world news, which was not unusual—it could have been coming from Hong Kong, Singapore, Cairo, even London itself.

Through the hissing of the static the public-school voice of the reporter could barely be made out ". . . British Everest Expedition of 1987 is now on the Rongbuk Glacier in Tibet, and over the next two months they expect to repeat the historic route of the attempts made in the twenties and thirties. Our correspondent to the expedition reports—" and then the voice changed to one even more staccato and drowned in static: "—the expedition's principal goal of recovering the bodies of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, who were last seen near the summit in 1924,

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crackle, buzz. . . . chances considerably improved by conversations with a partner of the Chinese climber who reported seeing a body on the North Face in 1980 *bzzzzkrkrk!*—description of the site of the finding *sssssssss* . . . snow levels very low this year, and all concerned feel chances for success are *sssskrkssss*." The voice faded away in a roar of static.

Trevor looked around at us, eyebrows lifted. "Did I understand them to say that they are going to search for Mallory and Irvine's *bodies*?"

A look of deep horror creased Mad Tom's face. Marion wrinkled her nose as if her chang had turned to Tibetan tea. "I can't believe it."

I didn't know it at the time, but this was an unexpected opportunity for Freds to put his plan into action ahead of schedule. He said, "Haven't you heard about that? Why Kunga Norbu here is precisely the climber they're talking about, the one who spotted a body on the North Face in 1980."

"He *is*?" we all said.

"Yeah, you bet. Kunga was part of the Chinese expedition to the North Ridge in 1980, and he was up there doing reconnaissance for a direct route on the North Face when he saw a body." Freds spoke to Kunga Norbu in Tibetan, and Kunga nodded and replied at some length. Freds translated for him: "He says it was a Westerner, wearing old-fashioned clothing, and it had clearly been there a long time. Here, he says he can mark it on a photo—" Freds got out his wallet and pulled a wad of paper from it. Unfolded, it revealed itself as a battered black-and-white photo of Everest as seen from the Tibetan side. Kunga Norbu studied it for long time, talked it over with Freds, and then took a pencil from Freds and carefully made a circle on the photo.

"Why he's circled half the North Face," John pointed out. "It's fooking useless."

"Nah," Freds said. "Look, it's a little circle."

"It's a little photo, innit."

"Well, he can describe the spot exactly—it's up there on top of the Black Band. Anyway, someone has managed to get together an expedition to go looking for the bodies, or the body, whatever. Now Kunga slipped over to Nepal last year, so this expedition is going on second-hand information from his climbing buds. But that might be enough."

"And if they find the bodies?"

"Well, I think they're planning to take them down and ship them to London and bury them in Winchester Cathedral."

The Brits stared at him. "You mean Westminster Abbey?" Trevor ventured.

"Oh that's right, I always get those two mixed up. Anyway that's what they're going to do, and they're going to make a movie out of it."

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I groaned at the thought. More video.

The four Brits groaned louder than I did. "That is rilly dis-gusting," Marion said.

"Sickening," John and Mad Tom agreed.

"It is a travesty, isn't it?" Trevor said. "I mean those chaps belong up there if anybody does. It's nothing less than grave robbing!"

And his three companions nodded. On one level they were joking, making a pretense of their outrage; but underneath that, they were dead serious. They meant it.

V

To understand why they would care so much, you have to understand what the story of Mallory and Irvine means to the British soul. Climbing has always been more important there than in America—you could say that the British invented the sport in Victorian times, and they've continued to excel in it since then, even after World War Two when much else there fell apart. You could say that climbing is the Rolls Royce of British sport. Whymper, Hillary, the brilliant crowd that climbed with Bonnington in the Seventies: they're all national heroes.

But none more so than Mallory and Irvine. Back in the twenties and thirties, you see, the British had a lock on Everest, because Nepal was closed to foreigners, and Tibet was closed to all but the British, who had barged in on them with Younghusband's campaign back in 1904. So the mountain was their private playground, and during those years they made four or five attempts, all of them failures, which is understandable: they were equipped like Boy Scouts, they had to learn high altitude technique on the spot, and they had terrible luck with weather.

The try that came closest was in 1924. Mallory was its lead climber, already famous from two previous attempts. As you may know, he was the guy who replied "Because it's there" when asked why anyone would want to climb the thing. This is either a very deep or a very stupid answer, depending on what you think of Mallory. You can take your pick of interpretations; the guy has been psychoanalyzed into the ground. Anyway, he and his partner Irvine were last glimpsed, by another expedition member, just eight hundred feet and less than a quarter of a mile from the summit—and at one P.M., on a day that had good weather except for a brief storm, and mist that obscured the peak from the observers below. So they either made it or they didn't; but something went wrong somewhere along the line, and they were never seen again.

A glorious defeat, a deep mystery: this is the kind of story that the English just love, as don't we all. All the public school virtues wrapped

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into one heroic tale—you couldn't write it better. To this day the story commands tremendous interest in England, and this is doubly true among people in the climbing community, who grew up on the story, and who still indulge in a lot of speculation about the two men's fate, in journal articles and pub debates and the like. They love that story.

Thus to go up there, and find the bodies, and end the mystery, and cart the bodies off to England . . . You can see why it struck my drinking buddies that night as a kind of sacrilege. It was yet another modern PR stunt—a money-grubbing plan made by some publicity hound—a Profaning of the Mystery. It was, in fact, a bit like videotrekking. Only worse. So I could sympathize, in a way.

VI

I tried to think of a change of subject, to distract the Brits. But Freds seemed determined to fire up their distress. He poked his finger onto the folded wreck of a photo. "You know what y'all oughta do," he told them in a low voice. "You mentioned getting lost and climbing Pumori? Well shit, what you oughta do instead is get lost in the other direction, and beat that expedition to the spot, and hide old Mallory. I mean here you've got the actual eyewitness right here to lead you to him! Incredible! You could bury Mallory in rocks and snow and then sneak back down. If you did that, they'd never find him!"

All the Brits stared at Freds, eyes wide. Then they looked at each other, and their heads kind of lowered together over the table. Their voices got soft. "He's a genius," Trevor breathed.

"Uh, no," I warned them. "He's not a genius." Laure was shaking his head. Even Kunga Norbu was looking doubtful.

Freds looked over the Brits at me and waggled his eyebrows vigorously, as if to say: this is a great idea! Don't foul it up!

"What about the Lho La?" John asked. "Won't we have to climb that?"

"Piece of cake," Freds said promptly.

"No," Laure protested. "Not piece cake! Pass! Very steep pass!"

"Piece of cake," Freds insisted. "I climbed it with those West Ridge direct guys a couple years ago. And once you top it you just slog onto the West Shoulder and there you are with the whole North Face, sitting right off to your left."

"Freds," I said, trying to indicate that he shouldn't incite his companions to such a dangerous, not to mention illegal, climb. "You'd need a lot more support for high camps than you've got. That circle there is pretty damn high on the mountain."

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"True," Freds said immediately. "It's pretty high. Pretty damn high. You can't get much higher."

Of course to climbers this was only another incitement, as I should have known.

"You'd have to do it like Woody Sayres did back in '62," Freds went on. "They got Sherpas to help them up the Nup La over by Cho Oyo, then bolted to Everest when they were supposed to be climbing Gyachung Kang. They moved a single camp with them all the way to Everest, and got back the same way. Just four of them, and they almost climbed it. And the Nup La is twenty miles further away from Everest than the Lho La. The Lho La's right there under it."

Mad Tom knocked his glasses up his nose, pulled out a pencil and began to do calculations on the table. Marion was nodding. Trevor was refilling all our glasses with chang. John was looking over Mad Tom's shoulder and muttering to him; apparently they were in charge of supplies.

Trevor raised his glass. "Right then," he said. "Are we for it?"

They all raised their glasses. "We're for it."

They were toasting the plan, and I was staring at them in dismay, when I heard the door creak and saw who was leaving the kitchen. "Hey!"

I reached out and dragged Arnold McConnell back into the room. "What're you doing here?"

Arnold shifted something behind his back. "Nothing, really. Just my nightly glass of milktea, you know . . . "

"It's him!" Marion exclaimed. She reached behind Arnold and snatched his camera from behind his back; he tried to hold onto it, but Marion was too strong for him. "Spying on me again, were you? Filming us from some dark corner?"

"No no," Arnold said. "Can't film in the dark, you know."

"Film in tent," Laure said promptly. "Night."

Arnold glared at him.

"Listen, Arnold," I said. "We were just shooting the bull here you know, a little private conversation over the chang. Nothing serious."

"Oh I know," Arnold assured me. "I know."

Marion stood and stared down at Arnold. They made a funny pair—her so long and rangy, him so short and tubby. Marion pushed buttons on the camera until the video cassette popped out, never taking her eye from him. She could really glare. "I suppose this is the same film you used this morning, when you filmed me taking my shower, is that right?" She looked at us. "I was in the little shower box they've got across the way, and the tin with the hot water in it got plugged at the bottom somehow. I had the door open a bit so I could stretch up and fiddle with it, when suddenly I noticed this pervert filming me!" She laughed angrily.

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"I bet you were quite pleased with that footage, weren't you, you peeping Tom!"

"I was just leaving to shoot yaks," Arnold explained rapidly, staring up at Marion with an admiring gaze. "Then there you were, and what was I supposed to do? I'm a filmmaker, I film beautiful things. I could make you a star in the States," he told her earnestly. "You're probably the most beautiful climber in the world."

"And all that competition," Mad Tom put in.

I was right about Marion's reaction to a compliment of that sort—she blushed to the roots, and considered punching him too—she might have, if they'd been alone.

"—adventure films back in the States, for PBS and the ski resort circuit," Arnold was going on, chewing his cigar and rolling his eyes as Marion took the cartridge over toward the stove.

The Sherpani waved her off. "Smell," she said.

Marion nodded and took the video cassette in her hands. Her forearms tensed, and suddenly you could see every muscle. And there were a lot of them, too, looking like thin bunched wires under the skin. We all stared, and instinctively Arnold raised his camera to his shoulder before remembering it was empty. That fact made him whimper, and he was fumbling at his jacket pocket for a spare when the cassette snapped diagonally and the videotape spilled out. Marion handed it all to the Sherpani, who dumped it in a box of potato peels, grinning.

We all looked at Arnold. He chomped his cigar, shrugged. "Can't make you a star that way," he said, and gave Marion a soulful leer. "Really, you oughta give me a chance, you'd be great. Such *presence*."

"I would appreciate it if you would now leave," Marion told him, and pointed at the door.

Arnold left.

"That guy could be trouble," Freds said.

VII

Freds was right about that.

But Arnold was not the only source of trouble. Freds himself was acting a bit peculiar, I judged. Still, when I thought of the various oddities in his recent behavior—his announcement that his friend Kunga Norbu was a tulku, and now this sudden advocacy of a Save Mallory's Body campaign—I couldn't put it all together. Why did he just happen to have a photo of the North Face of Everest in his wallet, for instance? It didn't make sense.

So when Freds's party and my trekking group took off upvalley from

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Pheriche on the same morning, I walked with Freds for a while. I wanted to ask him some questions. But there were a lot of people on the trail, and it was hard to get a moment to ourselves.

As an opener I said, "So, you've got a woman on your team."

"Yeah, Marion's great. She's probably the best climber of us all. And incredibly strong. You know those indoor walls they have in England, for practicing?"

"No."

"Well, the weather is so bad there, and the climbers are such fanatics, that they've built these thirty and forty foot walls inside gyms, and covered them with concrete and made little handholds." He laughed. "It looks dismal—scuzzy old gym with bad light and no heating, and all these guys stretched out on a concrete wall like some new kinda torture . . . Anyway I visited one of these, and they set me up in a race with Marion, up the two hardest pitches. Maybe 5.13 in places, impossible stuff. And there was a leak too. Everyone started betting on us, and the rule was someone had to top out for anyone to collect on the bets. I did my best, but I was hurrying and I came off about halfway up. So she won, but to collect the bets she had to top out. With the leak it really was impossible, but everyone who had bet on her was yelling at her to do it, so she just grit her teeth and started making these *moves,* man—" Freds illustrated in the air between us as we hiked—"And she was doing them in slow motion so she wouldn't come off. Just hanging there by her fingertips and toes, and I swear to God she hung on that wall for must've been *three hours.* Everyone else stopped climbing to watch. Guys were going home—guys were begging her to come off—guys had tears in their eyes. Finally she topped out and crawled over to the ladder and came down, and they mobbed her. They were ready to make her queen. In fact she pretty much is queen, as far as English climbers are concerned—you could bring the real one in, and if Marion were there they wouldn't even notice."

Then Arnold slipped between us, looking conspiratorial. "I think this Save Mallory scheme is a great idea," he whispered through clenched teeth. "I'm totally behind you, and it'll make a *great movie.*"

"You miss the point," I said to him.

"We ain't doing nothing but climb Lingtren," Freds said to him.

Arnold frowned, tucked his chin onto his chest, chewed his cigar. Frowning, Freds left to catch up with his group, and they soon disappeared ahead. So I lost my chance to talk to him.

We came to the upper end of Pheriche's valley, turned right and climbed to get into an even higher one. This was the valley of the Khumbu glacier, a massive road of ice covered with a chaos of gray rubble and milky blue melt ponds. We skirted the glacier and followed a trail up its lateral

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moraine to Lobuche, which consists of three teahouses and a tenting ground. The next day we hiked on upvalley to Gorak Shep.

Now Gorak Shep ("Dead Crow") is not the kind of place you see on posters in travel agencies. It's just above 17,000 feet, and up there the plant life has about given up. It's just two ragged little teahouses under a monstrous rubble hill, next to a gray glacial pond, and all in all it looks like the tailings of a very big gravel mine.

But what Gorak Shep does have is mountains. Big snowy mountains, on all sides. How big? Well, the wall of Nuptse, for instance, stands a full seven thousand feet over Gorak Shep. An avalanche we saw, sliding down a fraction of this wall and sounding like thunder, covered about two World Trade Centers' worth of height, and still looked tiny. And Nuptse is not as big as some of the peaks around it. So you get the idea.

Cameras can never capture this kind of scale, but you can't help trying, and my crowd tried for all they were worth in the days we were camped there. The ones handling the altitude well slogged up to the top of Kala Pattar ("Black Hill"), a local walker's peak which has a fine view of the Southwest Face of Everest. The day after that, Heather and Laure led most of the same people up the glacier to Everest Base Camp, while the rest of us relaxed. Everest Base Camp, set by the Indian Army this season, was basically a tent village like ours, but there are some fine seracs and ice towers to be seen along the way, and when they returned the clients seemed satisfied.

So I was satisfied too. No one had gotten any bad altitude sickness, and we would be starting back the next morning. I was feeling fine, sitting up on the hill above our tents in the late afternoon, doing nothing.

But then Laure came zipping down the trail from Base Camp, and when he saw me he came right over. "George George," he called out as he approached.

I stood as he reached me. "What's up?"

"I stay talk friends porter Indian Army base camp, Freds find me Freds say his base camp come please you. Climb Lho La find man camera come hire Sherpas finish with Freds, very bad follow Freds."

Now Laure's English is not very good, as you may have noticed. But after all we were in his country speaking my language—and for him English came after Sherpa, Nepali, and some Japanese and German, and how many languages do you speak?

Besides, I find I always get the gist of what Laure says, which is not something you can always say of all our fellow native speakers. So I cried out, "No! Arnold is *following* them?"

"Yes," Laure said. "Very bad. Freds say come please get."

"Arnold hired their Sherpas?"

Laure nodded. "Sherpas finish porter, Arnold hire."

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"Damn him! We'll have to climb up there and get him!"

"Yes. Very bad."

"Will you come with me?"

"Whatever you like."

I hustled to our tents to get together my climbing gear and tell Heather what had happened. "How did he get up there?" she asked. "I thought he was with you all day!"

"He told me he was going with you! He probably followed you guys all the way up, and kept on going. Don't worry about it, it's not your fault. Take the group back to Namche starting tomorrow, and we'll catch up with you." She nodded, looking worried.

Laure and I took off. Even going at Laure's pace we didn't reach Freds's base camp until the moon had risen.

Their camp was now only a single tent in a bunch of trampled snow, just under the steep headwall of the Khumbu Valley—the ridge that divides Nepal from Tibet. We zipped open the tent and woke Freds and Kunga Norbu.

"All right!" Freds said. "I'm glad you're here! Real glad!"

"Give me the story," I said.

"Well, that Arnold snuck up here, apparently."

"That's right."

"And our Sherpas were done and we had paid them, and I guess he hired them on the spot. They have a bunch of climbing gear, and we left fixed ropes up to the Lho La, so up they came. I tell you I was pretty blown away when they showed up in the pass! The Brits got furious and told Arnold to go back down, but he refused and, well, how do you make someone do something they don't want to up there? If you punch him out he's likely to have trouble getting down! So Kunga and I came back to get you and found Laure at Base Camp, and he said he'd get you while we held the fort."

"Arnold climbed the Lho La?" I said, amazed.

"Well, he's a pretty tough guy, I reckon. Didn't you ever see that movie he made of the kayak run down the Baltoro? Radical film, man, really it's up there with *The Man Who Skied Down Everest* for radicalness. And he's done some other crazy things too, like flying a hang glider off the Grand Teton, filming all the way. He's tougher than he looks. I think he just does the Hollywood sleaze routine so he can get away with things. Anyway those are some excellent climbing Sherpas he's got, and with them and the fixed ropes he just had to gut it out. And I guess he acclimatizes well, because he was walking around up there like he was at the beach."

I sighed. "That is one determined filmmaker."

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Freds shook his head. "The guy is a leech. He's gonna drive the Brits bats if we don't haul his ass back down here."

VIII

So the next day the four of us started the ascent of the Lho La, and were quickly engaged in some of the most dangerous climbing I've ever done. Not the most technically difficult—the Brits had left fixed rope in the toughest sections, so our progress was considerably aided. But it was still dangerous, because we were climbing an icefall, which is to say a glacier on a serious tilt.

Now a glacier as you know is a river of ice, and like its liquid counterparts it is always flowing downstream. Its rate of flow is much slower than a river's, but it isn't negligible, especially when you're standing on it. Then you often hear creaks, groans, sudden cracks and booms, and you feel like you're on the back of a living creature.

Put that glacier on a hillside and everything is accelerated; the living creature becomes a dragon. The ice of the glacier breaks up into immense blocks and shards, and these shift regularly, then balance on a point or edge, then fall and smash to fragments, or crack open to reveal deep fissures. As we threaded our way up through the maze of the Lho La's icefall, we were constantly moving underneath blocks of ice that looked eternal but were actually precarious—they were certain to fall sometime in the next month or two. I'm not expert at probability theory, but I still didn't like it.

"Freds," I complained. "You said this was a piece of cake."

"It is," he said. "Check out how fast we're going."

"That's because we're scared to death."

"Are we? Hey, it must be only 45 degrees or so."

This is as steep as an icefall can get before the ice all falls downhill at once. Even the famous Khumbu Icefall, which we now had a fantastic view of over to our right, fell at only about 30 degrees. The Khumbu Icefall is an unavoidable part of the standard route on Everest, and it is by far the most feared section; more people have died there than anywhere else on the mountain. And the Lho La is worse than the Khumbu!

So I had some choice words for our situation as we climbed very quickly indeed, and most of them left Laure mystified. "Great, Freds," I shouted at him. "Real piece of cake all right!"

"Lot of icing, anyway," he said, and giggled. This under a wall that would flatten him like Wile E. Coyote if it fell. I shook my head.

"What do you think?" I said to Laure.

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"Very bad," Laure said. "Very bad, very dangerous."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Whatever you like."

We hurried.

Now I like climbing as much as anybody, almost, but I am not going to try to claim to you that it is an exceptionally sane activity. That day in particular I would not have been inclined to argue the point. The thing is, there is danger and there is danger. In fact climbers make a distinction, between objective danger and subjective danger. Objective dangers are things like avalanches and rockfall and storms, that you can't do anything about. Subjective dangers are those incurred by human error—putting in a bad hold, forgetting to fasten a harness, that sort of thing. See, if you are perfectly careful, then you can eliminate all the subjective dangers. And when you've eliminated the subjective dangers, you have only the objective dangers to face. So you can see it's very rational.

On this day, however, we were in the midst of a whole wall of objective danger, and it made me nervous. We pursued the usual course in such a case, which is to go like hell. The four of us were practically running up the Lho La. Freds, Kunga, and Laure were extremely fast and strong, and I am in reasonable shape myself; plus I get the benefits of more adrenalin than less imaginative types. So we were hauling buns.

Then it happened. Freds was next to me, on a rope with Kunga Norbu, and Kunga was the full rope length ahead of us—about twenty yards—leading the way around a traverse that went under a giant serac, which is what they call the fangs of blue ice that protrude out of an icefall, often in clusters. Kunga was right underneath this serac when without the slightest warning it sheered off and collapsed, shattering into a thousand pieces.

I had reflexively sucked in a gasp and was about to scream when Kunga Norbu jostled my elbow, nearly knocking me down. He was wedged in between Freds and me, and the rope tying them together was flapping between our legs.

Trying to revise my scream I choked, gasped for breath, choked again. Freds slapped me on the back to help. Kunga was definitely there, standing before us, solid and corporeal. And yet he had been under the serac! The broken pieces of the ice block were scattered before us, fresh and gleaming in the afternoon sun. The block had sheered off and collapsed without the slightest quiver or warning—there simply hadn't been time to get out from under it!

Freds saw the look on my face, and he grinned feebly. "Old Kunga Norbu is pretty fast when he has to be."

But that wasn't going to do. "Gah . . ." I said—and then Freds and

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Kunga were holding me up. Laure hurried to join us, round-eyed with apprehension.

"Very bad," he said.

"Gah," I attempted again, and couldn't go on.

"All right, all right," Freds said, soothing me with his gloved hands. "Hey, George. Relax."

"He," I got out, and pointed at the remains of the serac, then at Kunga.

"I know," Freds said, frowning. He exchanged a glance with Kunga, who was watching me impassively. They spoke to each other in Tibetan. "Listen," Freds said to me. "Let's top the pass and then I'll explain it to you. It'll take a while, and we don't have that much day left. Plus we've got to find a way around these ice cubes so we can stick to the fixed ropes. Come on, buddy." He slapped my arm. "Concentrate. Let's do it."

So we started up again, Kunga leading as fast as before. I was still in shock, however, and I kept seeing the collapse of the serac, with Kunga under it. He just couldn't have escaped it! And yet there he was up above us, jumaring up the fixed ropes like a monkey scurrying up a palm.

It was a miracle. And I had seen it. I had a hell of a time concentrating on the rest of that day's climb.

IX

In the late afternoon we topped the Lho La, and set our tent on the pass's flat expanse of deep hard snow. It was one of the spacier campsites I had ever occupied: on the crest of the Himalaya, in a broad saddle between the tallest mountain on earth, and the very spiky and beautiful Lingtren. Below us to one side was the Khumbu Glacier; on the other was the Rongbuk Glacier in Tibet. We were at about 20,000 feet, and so Freds and his friends had a long way to go before reaching old Mallory. But nothing above would be quite as arbitrarily dangerous as the icefall. As long as the weather held, that is. So far they had been lucky; it was turning out to be the driest October in years.

There was no sign of either the British team or Arnold's crew, except for tracks in the snow leading up the side of the West Shoulder and disappearing. So they were on their way up. "Damn!" I said. "Why didn't they wait?" Now we had more climbing to do, to catch Arnold.

I sat on my groundpad on the snow outside the tent. I was tired. I was also very troubled. Laure was getting the stove to start. Kunga Norbu was off by himself, sitting in the snow, apparently meditating on the sight of Tibet. Freds was walking around singing "Wooden Ships," clearly in heaven. "I mean, is this a great campsite or *what*," he cried to me. "Look at the view! It's too much, too much. I wish we'd brought some

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chang with us. I do have some hash, though. George, time to break out the pipe, hey?"

"Not yet, Freds. You get over here and tell me what the hell happened down there with your buddy Kunga Norbu. You promised you would."

Freds stood looking at me. We were in shadow—it was cold, but windless—the sky above was clear, and a very deep dark blue. The airy roar of the stove starting was the only sound.

Freds sighed, and his expression got as serious as it ever got: one eye squinted shut entirely, forehead furrowed, and lips squeezed tightly together. He looked over at Kunga, and saw he was watching us. "Well," he said after a while. "You remember a couple of weeks ago when we were down at Chimoa getting drunk?"

"Yeah?"

"And I told you Kunga Norbu was a tulku."

I gulped. "Freds, don't give me that again."

"Well," he said. "It's either that or tell you some kind of a lie. And I ain't so good at lying, my face gives me away or something."

"Freds, get serious!" But looking over at Kunga Norbu, sitting in the snow with that blank expression, and those weird black eyes, I couldn't help but wonder.

Freds said, "I'm sorry, man, I really am. I don't mean to blow your mind like this. But I did try to tell you before, you have to admit. And it's the simple truth. He's an honest-to-God tulku. First incarnation the famous Naropa, born in 1555. And he's been around ever since."

"So he met George Washington and like that?"

"Well, Washington didn't go to Tibet, so far as I know."

I stared at him. He shuffled about uncomfortably. "I know it's hard to take, George. Believe me. I had trouble with it myself, at first. But when you study under Kunga Norbu for a while, you see him do so many miraculous things, you can't help but believe."

I stared at him some more, speechless.

"I know," Freds said. "The first time he pulls one of his moves on you, it's a shock. I remember my first time real well. I was hiking with him from the hidden Rongbuk to Namche, we went right over Lho La like we did today only in the opposite direction, and right around Everest Base Camp we came across this Indian trekker who was turning blue. He was clearly set to die of altitude sickness, so Kunga and I carried him down between us to Pheriche, which was already a long day's work as you know. We took him to the Rescue Station and I figured they'd put him in the pressure tank they've got there, have you seen it? They've got a tank like a miniature submarine in their back room, and the idea is you stick a guy with altitude sickness in it and pressurize it down to sea level pressure, and he gets better. It's a neat idea, but it turns out

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that this tank was donated to the station by a hospital in Tokyo, and all the instructions for it are in Japanese, and no one at the station reads Japanese. Besides as far as anyone there knows it's an experimental technique only, no one is quite sure if it will work or not, and nobody there is inclined to do any experimenting on sick trekkers. So we're back to square one and this guy was sicker than ever, so Kunga and I started down towards Namche, but I was getting exhausted and it was really slow going, and all of a sudden Kunga Norbu picked him up and slung him across his shoulders, which was already quite a feat of strength as this Indian was kind of pear-shaped, a heavy guy—and then Kunga just took off running down the trail with him! I hollered at him and ran after him trying to keep up, and I tell you I was *zooming* down that trail, and still Kunga ran right out of sight! Big long steps like he was about to fly! I couldn't believe it!"

Freds shook his head. "That was the first time I saw Kunga Norbu going into *lung-gom* mode. Means magic long-distance running, and it was real popular in Tibet at one time. An adept like Kunga is called a *lung-gom-pa,* and when you get it down you can run really far really fast. Even levitate a little. You saw him today—that was a *lung-gom* move he laid on that iceblock."

"I see," I said, in a kind of daze. I called out to Laure, still at the stove: "Hey Laure! Freds says Kunga Norbu is a tulku!"

Laure smiled, nodded. "Yes, Kunga Norbu Lama very fine tulku!"

I took a deep breath. Over in the snow Kunga Norbu sat cross-legged, looking out at his country. Or somewhere. "I think I'm ready for that hash pipe," I told Freds.

X

It took us two days to catch up to Arnold and the Brits, two days of miserable slogging up the West Shoulder of Everest. Nothing complicated here: the slope was a regular expanse of hard snow, and we just put on the crampons and ground on up it. It was murderous work. Not that I could tell with Freds and Laure and Kunga Norbu. There may be advantages to climbing on Everest with a tulku, a Sherpa long-distance champion, and an American space cadet, but longer rest stops are not among them. Those three marched uphill as if paced by Sousa marches, and I trailed behind huffing and puffing, damning Arnold with every step.

Late on the second day I struggled onto the top of the West Shoulder, a long snowy divide under the West Ridge proper. By the time I got there Freds and Laure already had the tent up, and they were securing it to

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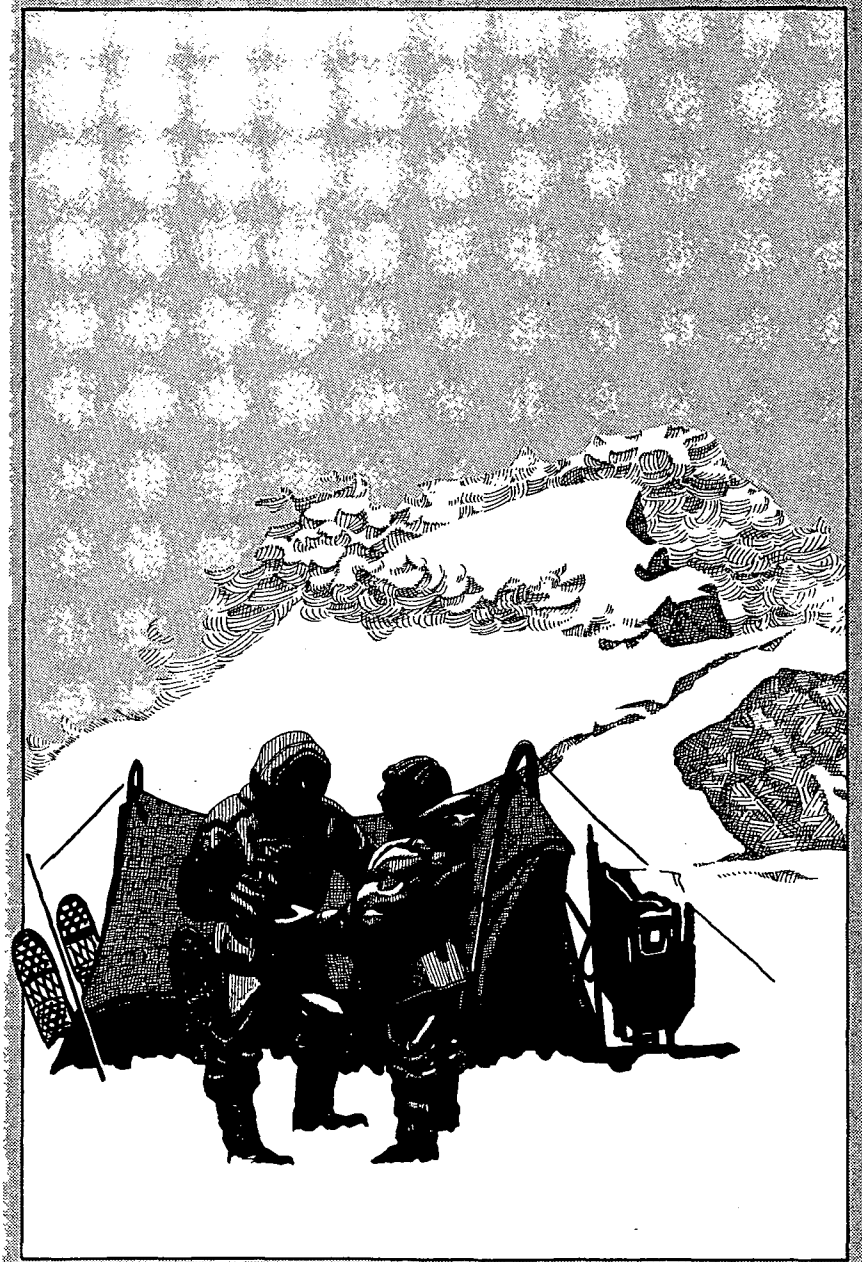

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the snow with a network of climbing rope, while Kunga Norbu sat to one side doing his meditation.

Further down the Shoulder were the two camps of the other teams, placed fairly close together as there wasn't a whole lot of extra flat ground up there to choose from. After I had rested and drunk several cups of hot lemon drink, I said, "Let's go find out how things stand." Freds walked over with me.

As it turned out, things were not standing so well. The Brits were in their tent, waist deep in their sleeping bags and drinking tea. And they were not amused. "The man is utterly daft," Marion said. She had a mild case of high-altitude throat, and any syllable she tried to emphasize disappeared entirely. "We've *oyd* outrunning him, but the Sherpas are good, and he *oyy* be strong."

"A fooking leech he is," John said.

Trevor grinned ferociously. His lower face was pretty sunburned, and his lips were beginning to break up. "We're counting on you to get him back down, George."

"I'll see what I can do."

Marion shook her head. "God knows we've tried, but it does no good whatever, he won't listen, he just rattles on about making me a *stee,* I don't know how to *dee* with that." She turned red. "And none of these brave chaps will agree that we should just go over there and seize his bloody camera and throw it into Ti*beee*!"

The guys shook their heads. "We'd have to deal with the Sherpas," Mad Tom said to Marion patiently. "What are we going to do, fight with them? I can't even imagine it."

"And if Mad Tom can't imagine it,'" Trevor said.

Marion just growled.

"I'll go talk to him," I said.

But I didn't have to go anywhere, because Arnold had come over to greet us. "Hello!" he called out cheerily. "George, what a surprise! What brings you up here?"

I got out of the tent. Arnold stood before me, looking sunburned but otherwise all right. "You know what brings me up here, Arnold. Here, let's move away a bit, I'm sure these folks don't want to talk to you."

"Oh, no, I've been talking to them every day! We've been having lots of good talks. And today I've got some real news." He spoke into the tent. "I was looking through my zoom over at the North Col, and I see they've set up a camp over there! Do you suppose it's that expedition looking for Mallory's body?"

Curses came from the tent.

"I know!" Arnold exclaimed. "Kind of puts the pressure on to get going, don't you think? Not much time to spare."

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"Bugger off!"

Arnold shrugged. "Well, I've got it on tape if you want to see. Looked like they were wearing Helly-Hansen jackets, if that tells you anything."

"Don't tell me you can read labels from this distance," I said.

Arnold grinned. "It's a hell of a zoom lens. I could read their lips if I wanted to."

I studied him curiously. He really seemed to be doing fine, even after four days of intense climbing. He looked a touch thinner, and his voice had an altitude rasp to it, and he was pretty badly sunburned under the stubble of his beard—but he was still chewing a whitened cigar between zinc-oxided lips, and he still had the same wide-eyed look of wonder that his filming should bother anybody. I was impressed; he was definitely a lot tougher than I had expected. He reminded me of Dick Bass, the American millionaire who took a notion to climb the highest mountain on each continent. Like Bass, Arnold was a middle-aged guy paying pros to take him up; and like Bass, he acclimatized well, and had a hell of a nerve.

So, there he was, and he wasn't falling apart. I had to try something else. "Arnold, come over here a little with me, let's leave these people in peace."

"Good *reee*!" Marion shouted from inside the tent.

"That Marion," Arnold said admiringly when we were out of earshot. "She's really beautiful, I mean I really, really, really like her." He struck his chest to show how smitten he was.

I glared at him. "Arnold, it doesn't matter if you're falling for her or *what*, because they *definitely* do not want you along for this climb. Filming them destroys the whole point of what they're trying to do up there."

Arnold seized my arm. "No it doesn't! I keep trying to explain that to them. I can edit the film so that no one will know where Mallory's body is. They'll just know it's up here safe, because four young English climbers took incredible risks to keep it free from the publicity hounds threatening to tear it away to London. It's great, George. I'm a filmmaker, and I know when something will make a great movie, and this will make a great movie."

I frowned. "Maybe it would, but the problem is this climb is illegal, and if you make the film, then the illegal part becomes known and these folks will be banned by the Nepali authorities. They'll never be let into Nepal again."

"So? Aren't they willing to make that sacrifice for Mallory?"

I frowned. "For your movie, you mean. Without that they could do it and no one would be the wiser."

"Well, okay, but I can leave their names off it or something. Give them stage names. Marion Davies, how about that?"

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"I think that one's been used before." I thought. "Listen, Arnold, you'd be in the same kind of trouble, you know. They might not ever let you back, either."

He waved a hand. "I can get around that kind of thing. Get a lawyer. Or baksheesh, a lot of baksheesh."

"These guys don't have that kind of money, though. Really, you'd better watch it. If you press them too hard they might do something drastic. At the least they'll stop you, higher up. When they find the body a couple of them will come back and stop you, and the other two bury the body, and you won't get any footage at all."

He shook his head. "I got lenses, haven't I been telling you? Why I've been shooting what these four eat for breakfast every morning. I've got hours of Marion on film for instance," he sighed, "and my God could I make her a star. Anyway I could film the burial from here if I had to, so I'll take my chances. Don't you worry about me."

"I am *not* worrying about you," I said. "Take my word for it. But I do wish you'd come back down with me. They don't want you up here, and I don't want you up here. It's dangerous, especially if we lose this weather. Besides, you're breaking your contract with our agency, which said you'd follow my instructions on the trek."

"Sue me."

I took a deep breath.

Arnold put a friendly hand to my arm. "Don't worry so much, George. They'll love me when they're stars." He saw the look on my face and stepped away. "And don't you try anything funny with me, or I'll slap some kind of kidnapping charge on you, and you'll never guide a trek again."

"Don't tempt me like that," I told him, and stalked back to the Brits' camp.

I dropped into their tent. Laure and Kunga Norbu had joined them, and we were jammed in there. "No luck," I said. They weren't surprised.

"Superleech," Freds commented cheerfully.

We sat around and stared at the blue flames of the stove.

Then, as usually happens in these predicaments, I said, "I've got a plan."

It was relatively simple, as we didn't have many options. We would all descend back to the Lho La, and maybe even down to Base Camp, giving Arnold the idea we had given up. Once down there the Brits and Freds and Kunga Norbu could restock at the Gorak Shep teahouses, and Laure and I would undertake to stop Arnold, by stealing his boots for instance. Then they could go back up the fixed ropes and try again.

Trevor looked dubious. "It's difficult getting up here, and we don't have much time, if that other expedition is already on the North Col."

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"I've got a better plan," Freds announced. "Looky here, Arnold's following you Brits, but not us. If we four pretended to go down, while you four took the West Ridge direct, then Arnold would follow you. Then we four could sneak off into the Diagonal Ditch, and pass you by going up the Hornbein Couloir, which is actually faster than the West Ridge direct. You wouldn't see us and we'd be up there where the body is, lickety-split."

Well, no one was overjoyed at this plan. The Brits would have liked to find Mallory themselves, I could see. And I didn't have any inclination to go any higher than we already had. In fact I was dead set against it.

But by now the Brits were absolutely locked onto the idea of saving Mallory from TV and Westminster Abbey. "It would do the job," Marion conceded.

"And we might lose the leech on the ridge," Mad Tom added. "It's a right piece of work or so I'm told."

"That's right!" Freds said happily. "Laure, are you up for it?"

"Whatever you like," Laure said, and grinned. He thought it was a fine idea. Freds then asked Kunga Norbu, in Tibetan, and reported to us that Kunga gave the plan his mystic blessing.

"George?"

"Oh, man, no. I'd rather just get him down some other way."

"Ah come on!" Freds cried. "We don't have another way, and you don't want to let down the side, do you? Sticky wicket and all that?"

"He's your fooking client," John pointed out.

"Geez. Oh, man . . . Well . . . All right."

I walked back to our tent feeling that things were really getting out of control. In fact I was running around in the grip of other people's plans, plans I by no means approved of, made by people whose mental balance I doubted. And all this on the side of a mountain that had killed over fifty people. It was a bummer.

XI

But I went along with the plan. Next morning we broke camp and made as if to go back down. The Brits started up the West Ridge, snarling dire threats at Arnold as they passed him. Arnold and his Sherpas were already packed, and after giving the Brits a short lead they took off after them. Arnold was roped up to their leader Ang Rita, raring to go, his camera in a chest pack. I had to hand it to him—he was one tenacious peeping Tom.

We waved good-bye and stayed on the shoulder until they were above us, and momentarily out of sight. Then we hustled after them, and took

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a left into the so-called Diagonal Ditch, which led out onto the North Face.

We were now following the route first taken by Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld, in 1963. A real mountaineering classic, actually, which goes up what is now called the Hornbein Couloir. Get out any good photo of the North Face of Everest and you'll see it—a big vertical crack on the right side. It's a steep gully, but quite a bit faster than the West Ridge.

So we climbed. It was hard climbing, but not as scary as the Lho La. My main problem on this day was paranoia about the weather. Weather is no common concern on the side of Everest. You don't say, "Why snow would really ruin the day." Quite a number of people have been caught by storms on Everest and killed by them, including the guys we were going to look for. So whenever I saw wisps of cloud streaming out from the peak, I tended to freak. And the wind whips a banner of cloud from the peak of Everest almost continuously. I kept looking up and seeing that banner, and groaning. Freds heard me.

"Gee, George, you sound like you're really hurting on this pitch."

"Hurry up, will you?"

"You want to go faster? Well, okay, but I gotta tell you I'm going about as fast as I can. I don't think I want to tell Kunga to hurry more, because he might do it."

I believed that. Kunga Norbu was using ice axe and crampons to fire up the packed snow in the middle of the couloir, and Freds was right behind him; they looked like roofers on a ladder. I did my best to follow, and Laure brought up the rear. Both Freds and Kunga had grins so wide and fixed that you'd have thought they were on acid. Their teeth were going to get sunburned they were loving it so much. Meanwhile I was gasping for air, and worrying about that summit banner . . . it was one of the greatest climbing days of my life.

How's that, you ask? Well . . . it's hard to explain. But it's something like this: when you get on a mountain wall with a few thousand feet of empty air below you, it catches your attention. Of course part of you says oh my God, it's all over. Whyever did I do this! But another part sees that in order not to die you must pretend you are quite calm, and engaged in a semi-theoretical gymnastics exercise intended to move you higher. You *pay attention* to the exercise like no one has ever paid attention before. Eventually you find yourself on a flat spot of some sort—three feet by five feet will do. You look around and realize that you did not die, that you are still alive. And at that point this fact becomes really exhilarating. You really *appreciate* being alive. It's a sort of power, or a privilege granted you, in any case it feels quite special, like a flash of higher consciousness. Just to be alive! And in retrospect, that *paying*

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attention when you were climbing—your remember that as a higher consciousness too.

You can get hooked on feelings like those; they are the ultimate altered state. Drugs can't touch them. I'm not saying this is real healthy behavior, you understand. I'm just saying it happens.

For instance, at the end of this particular intense day in the Hornbein Couloir, the four of us emerged at its top, having completed an Alpine-style blitz of it due in large part to Kunga Norbu's inspired leads. We made camp on top of a small flat knob just big enough for our tent. And looking around—what a feeling! It really was something. There were only four or five mountains in the world taller than we were in that campsite, and you could tell. We could see all the way across Tibet, it seemed. Now Tibet, as Galen Rowell once said, tends mostly to look like a freeze-dried Nevada—but from our height it was range after range of snowy peaks, white on black forever, all tinted sepia by the afternoon sun. It seemed the world was nothing but mountains.

Freds plopped down beside me, idiot grin still fixed on his face. He had a steaming cup of lemon drink in one hand, his hash pipe in the other and he was singing "Truckin'." He took a hit from the pipe and handed it to me.

"Are you sure we should be smoking up here?"

"Sure, it helps you breathe."

"Come on."

"No, really. The nerve center that controls your involuntary breathing shuts down in the absence of carbon dioxide, and there's hardly any of that up here, so the smoke provides it."

I decided that on medical grounds I'd better join him. We passed the pipe back and forth. Behind us Laure was in the tent, humming to himself and getting his sleeping bag out. Kunga Norbu sat in the lotus position on the other side of the tent, intent on realms of his own. The world, all mountains, turned under the sun.

Freds exhaled happily. "This must be the greatest place on earth, don't you think?"

That's the feeling I'm talking about.

XII

We had a long and restless night of it, because it's harder than hell to sleep at that altitude. But the next day dawned clear and windless once again, and after breakfasting we headed along the top of the Black Band.

Our route was unusual, perhaps unique. The Black Band, harder than

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the layers of rock above and below it, sticks out from the generally smooth slope of the face in a crumbly rampart. So in effect we had a sort of road to walk on. Although it was uneven and busted up, it was still twenty feet wide in places, and an easier place for a traverse couldn't be imagined. There were potential campsites all over it.

Of course usually when people are at 28,000 feet on Everest, they're interested in getting either higher or lower pretty quick. Since this rampway was level and didn't facilitate any route whatsoever, it wasn't much traveled. We might have been the first on it, since Freds said that Kunga Norbu had only looked down on it from above.

So we walked this high road, and made our search. Freds knocked a rock off the edge, and we watched it bounce down toward the Rongbuk Glacier until it became invisible, though we could still hear it. After that we trod a little more carefully. Still, it wasn't long before we had traversed the face and were looking down the huge clean chute of the Great Couloir. Here the rampart ended, and to continue the traverse to the fabled North Ridge, where Mallory and Irvine were last seen, would have been ugly work. Besides, that wasn't where Kunga Norbu had seen the body.

"We must have missed it," Freds said. "Let's spread out side to side, and check every little nook and cranny on the way back." So we did, taking it very slowly, and ranging out to the edge of the rampart as far as we dared.

We were about halfway back to the Hornbein Couloir when Laure found it. He called out, and we approached.

"Well dog my cats," Freds said, looking astonished.

The body was wedged in a crack, chest deep in a hard pack of snow. He was on his side, and curled over so that he was level with the rock on each side of the crack. His clothing was frayed, and rotting away on him; it looked like knit wool. The kind of thing you'd wear golfing in Scotland. His eyes were closed, and under a fraying hood his skin looked papery. Sixty years out in sun and storm, but always in below-freezing air, had preserved him strangely. I had the odd feeling that he was only sleeping, and might wake and stand.

Freds knelt beside him and dug in the snow a bit. "Look here—he's roped up, but the rope broke."

He held up an inch or two of unraveled rope—natural fibers, horribly thin—it made me shudder to see it. "Such primitive gear!" I cried.

Freds nodded briefly. "They were nuts. I don't think he's got an oxygen pack on either. They had it available, but he didn't like to use it." He shook his head. "They probably fell together. Stepped through a cornice maybe. Then fell down to here, and this one jammed in the crack while the other one went over the edge, and the rope broke."

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"So the other one is down in the glacier," I said.

Freds nodded slowly. "And look—" he pointed above. "We're almost directly under the summit. So they must have made the top. Or fallen when damned close to it." He shook his head. "And wearing nothing but a jacket like that! Amazing."

"So they made it," I breathed.

"Well, maybe. Looks like it, anyway. So . . . which one is this?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell. Early twenties, or mid-thirties?"

Uneasily we looked at the mummified features.

"Thirties," Laure said. "Not young."

Freds nodded. "I agree."

"So it's Mallory," I said.

"Hmph." Freds stood and stepped back. "Well, that's that. The mystery solved." He looked at us, spoke briefly with Kunga Norbu. "He must be under snow most years. But let's hide him under rock, for the Brits."

This was easier said than done. All we needed were stones to lay over him, as he was tucked down in the crack. But we quickly found that loose stones of any size were not plentiful; they had been blown off. So we had to work in pairs, and pick up big flat plates that were heavy enough to hold against the winds.

We were still collecting these when Freds suddenly jerked back and sat behind an outcropping of the rampart. "Hey, the Brits are over there on the West Ridge! They're almost level with us!"

"Arnold can't be far behind," I said.

"We've still got an hour's work here," Freds exclaimed. "Here—Laure, listen—go back to our campsite and pack our stuff, will you? Then go meet the Brits and tell them to slow down. Got that?"

"Slow down," Laure repeated.

"Exactly. Explain we found Mallory and they should avoid this area. Give us time. You stay with them, go back down with them. George and Kunga and I will follow you guys down, and we'll meet you at Gorak Shep."

Gorak Shep? That seemed farther down than necessary.

Laure nodded. "Slow down, go back, we meet you Gorak Shep."

"You got it, buddy. See you down there."

Laure nodded and was off.

"Okay," Freds said. "Let's get this guy covered."

We built a low wall around him, and then used the biggest plate of all as a keystone to cover his face. It took all three of us to pick it up, and we staggered around to get it into position without disturbing him; it really knocked the wind out of us.

When we were done the body was covered, and most of the time snow would cover our burial cairn, and it would be just one lump among

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thousands. So he was hidden. "Shouldn't we say something?" Freds asked. "You know, an epitaph or whatever?"

"Hey, Kunga's the holy man," I said. "Tell him to do it."

Freds spoke to Kunga. In his snow goggles I could see little images of Kunga, looking like a Martian in his dirty red down jacket, hood and goggles. Quite a change in gear since old Mallory!

Kunga Norbu stood at the end of our cairn and stuck out his mittened hands; he spoke in Tibetan for a while.

Afterwards Freds translated for me: "Spirit of Chomolungma, Mother Goddess of the World, we're here to bury the body of George Leigh Mallory, the first person to climb your sacred slopes. He was a climber with a lot of heart and he always went for it, and we love him for that—he showed very purely something that we all treasure in ourselves. I'd like to add that it's also clear from his clothing and gear that he was a total loon to be up here at all, and I in particular would like to salute that quality as well. So here we are, four disciples of your holy spirit, and we take this moment to honor that spirit here and in us, and everywhere in the world." Kunga bowed his head, and Freds and I followed suit, and we were silent; and all we heard was the wind, whistling over the Mother Goddess into Tibet.

XIII

Fine. Our mission was accomplished, Mallory was safely hidden on Everest for all time, we had given him what I had found a surprisingly moving burial ceremony, and I for one was pretty pleased. But back at our campsite, Freds and Kunga started acting oddly. Laure had packed up the tent and our packs and left them for us, and now Freds and Kunga were hurrying around repacking them.

I said something to the effect that you couldn't beat the view from Mallory's final resting place, and Freds looked up at me, and said,

"Well, you could beat it by a *little*." And he continued repacking feverishly. "In fact I've been meaning to talk to you about that," he said as he worked. "I mean, here we are, right? I mean here we are."

"Yes," I said. "We are here."

"I mean to say, here we are at almost twenty-eight thou, on Mount Everest. And it's only noon, and it's a perfect day. I mean a *perfect* day. Couldn't ask for a nicer day."

I began to see what he was driving at. "No way, Freds."

"Ah come on! Don't be hasty about this, George! We're above all the hard parts, it's just a walk from here to the top!"

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"No," I said firmly. "We don't have time. And we don't have much food. And we can't trust the weather. It's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous! All climbing is too dangerous, George, but I don't notice that that ever stopped you before. Think about it, man! This ain't just some ordinary mountain, this ain't no Rainier or Denali, this is *Everest*. Sargaramantha! Chomo*lung*ma! The BIG E! Hasn't it always been your secret fantasy to climb Everest?"

"Well, no. It hasn't."

"I don't believe you! It sure is mine, I'll tell you that. It's gotta be yours too."

All the time we argued Kunga Norbu was ignoring us, while he rooted through his pack tossing out various inessential items.

Freds sat down beside me and began to show me the contents of his pack. "I got our butt pads, the stove, a pot, some soup and lemon mix, a good supply of food, and here's my snow shovel so we can bivvy somewhere. Everything we need."

"No."

"Looky here, George." Freds pulled off his goggles and stared me in the eye. "It was nice to bury Mallory and all, but I have to tell you that Kunga Norbu Lama and I have had what you'd call an *ulterior motive* all along here. We joined the Brits on the Lingtren climb because I had heard about this Mallory expedition from the north side, and I was planning all along to tell them about it, and show them our photo, and tell them that Kunga was the guy who saw Mallory's body back in 1980, and suggest that they go hide him."

"You mean Kunga *wasn't* the one who saw Mallory's body?" I said.

"No, he wasn't. I made that up. The Chinese climber who saw a body up here was killed a couple years later. So I just had Kunga circle the general area where I heard the Chinese saw him. That's why I was so surprised when we actually ran across the guy! Although it stands to reason when you look at the North Face—there isn't anywhere else but the Black Band that would have stopped him.

"Anyway I lied about that, and I also suggested we slip up the Hornbein Couloir and find the body when Arnold started tailing the Brits—and all of that was because I was just hoping we'd get into this situation, where we got the time and the weather to shoot for the top, we were both just *hoping* for it man and here we are. We got everything planned, Kunga and I have worked it all out—we've got all the stuff we need, and if we have to bivvy on the South Summit after we bag the peak, then we can descend by way of the Southeast Ridge and meet the Indian Army team in the South Col, and get escorted back to Base Camp, that's the yak route and won't be any problem."

He took a few deep breaths. "Plus, well, listen. Kunga Lama has got

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mystic reasons for wanting to go up there, having to do with his long-time guru Tilopa Lama. Remember I told you back in Chimoa how Tilopa had set a task for Kunga Norbu, that Kunga had to accomplish before the monastery at Kum-Bum would be rebuilt, and Kunga set free to be his own lama at last? Well—the task was to *climb Chomolungma*! That old son of a gun said to Kunga, you just climb Chomolungma and everything'll be fine! Figuring that meant that he would have a disciple for just as many re-incarnations as he would ever go through this side of nirvana. But he didn't count on Kunga Norbu teaming up with his old student Freds Fredericks, and his buddy George Fergusson!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I can see you feel very deeply about this, Freds, and I respect that, but I'm not going."

"We need you along, George! Besides, we're going to do it, and we can't really leave you to go back down the West Ridge by yourself—that'd be more dangerous than coming along with us! And we're going to the peak, so you have to come along, it's that simple!"

Freds had been talking so fast and hard that he was completely out of breath; he waved a hand at Kunga Norbu. "You talk to him," he said to Kunga, then switched to Tibetan, no doubt to repeat the message.

Kunga Norbu pulled up his snow goggles, and very serenely he looked at me. He looked just a little sad; it was the sort of expression you might get if you refused to give to the United Way. His black eyes looked right through me just as they always did, and in that high-altitude glare his pupils kind of pulsed in and out, in and out, in and out. And damned if that old bastard didn't hypnotize me. I think.

But I struggled against it. I found myself putting on my pack, and checking my crampons to make sure they were really, really, really tight, and at the same time I was shouting at Freds. "Freds, be reasonable! No one climbs Everest unsupported like this! It's too dangerous!"

"Hey, Messner did it. Messner climbed it in two days from North Col by himself, all he had was his girlfriend waiting down at base camp."

"You can't use Reinhold Messner as an example," I cried. "Messner is cuckoo."

"Nah. He's just tough and fast. And so are we. It won't be a problem."

"Freds, climbing Everest is generally considered a problem." But Kunga Norbu had put on his pack and was starting up the slope above our campsite, and Freds was following him, and I was following Freds. "For one big problem," I yelled, "we don't have any oxygen!"

"People climb it without oxygen all the time now."

"Yeah, but you pay the price. You don't get enough oxygen up there, and it kills brain cells like you can't believe! If we go up there we're certain to lose *millions* of brain cells."

"So?" He couldn't see the basis of the objection.

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I groaned. We continued up the slope.

XIV

And that is how I found myself climbing Mount Everest with a Tibetan tulku and the wild man of Arkansas. It was not a position that a reasonable person could defend to himself, and indeed as I trudged after Freds and Kunga I could scarcely believe it was happening. But every labored breath told me it was. And since it was, I decided I had better psych myself into the proper frame of mind for it, or else it would only be that much more dangerous. "Always wanted to do this," I said, banishing the powerful impression that I had been hypnotized into the whole deal. "We're climbing Everest, and I really want to."

"That's the attitude," Freds said.

I ignored him and kept thinking the phrase "I want to do this," once for every two steps. After a few hundred steps, I had to admit that I had myself somewhat convinced. I mean, Everest! Think about it! I suppose that like anyone else, I had the fantasy in there somewhere.

I won't bother you with the details of our route; if you want them you can consult my anonymous article in the *American Alpine Journal,* 1986 issue. Actually it was fairly straightforward; we contoured up from the Hornbein Couloir to the upper West Ridge, and continued from there.

I did this in bursts of ten steps at a time; the altitude was finally beginning to hammer me. I acclimatize as well as anyone I know, but nobody acclimatizes over 26,000 feet. It's just a matter of how fast you wind down.

"Try to go as slow as you need to, and avoid rests," Freds advised.

"I'm going as slow as I can already."

"No you're not. Try to just flow uphill. Really put it into first gear. You fall into a certain rhythm."

"All right. I'll try."

We were seated at this point to take off our crampons, which were unnecessary. Freds had been right about the ease of the climb up here. The ridge was wide, it wasn't very steep, and it was all broken up, so that irregular rock staircases were everywhere on it. If it were at sea level you could run up it, literally. It was so easy that I could try Freds's suggestion, and I followed him and Kunga up the ridge in slow-slow motion. At that rate I could go about five or ten minutes between rests—it's hard to be sure how long, as each interval seemed like an afternoon on its own.

But with each stop we were a little higher. There was no denying the West Ridge had a first-class view: to our right all the mountains of Nepal,

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to our left all the mountains of Tibet, and you could throw in Sikkim and Bhutan for change. Mountains everywhere: and all of them below us. The only thing still above us was the pyramid of Everest's final summit, standing brilliant white against a black blue sky.

At each rest stop I found Kunga Norbu was humming a strange Buddhist chant; he was looking happier and happier in a subtle sort of way, while Freds's grin got wider and wider. "Can you believe how perfect the day is? Beautiful, huh?"

"Uh huh." It was nice, all right. But I was too tired to enjoy it. Some of their energy poured into me at each stop, and that was a good thing, because they were really going strong, and I needed the help.

Finally the ridge became snow-covered again, and we had to sit down and put our crampons back on. I found this usually simple process almost more than I could handle. My hands left pink afterimages in the air, and I hissed and grunted at each pull on the straps. When I finished and stood, I almost keeled over. The rocks swam, and even with my goggles on the snow was painfully white.

"Last bit," Freds said as we looked up the slope. We crunched into it, and our crampons spiked down into firm snow. Kunga took off at an unbelievable pace. Freds and I marched up side by side, sharing a pace to take some of the mental effort out of it.

Freds wanted to talk, even though he had no breath to spare. "Old Tilopa Lama. Going to be. Mighty surprised. When they start rebuilding Kum-Bum. Ha!"

I nodded as if I believed in the whole story. This was an exaggeration, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but to put one foot in front of the other, in blazing white snow.

I have read that Everest stands just at the edge of the possible, as far as climbing it without oxygen goes. The scientific team that concluded this, after a climb in which air and breath samples were taken, actually decided that theoretically it wasn't possible at all. Sort of a bumblebee's flight situation. One scientist speculated that if Everest were just a couple hundred feet taller, then it *really* couldn't be done.

I believe that. Certainly the last few steps up that snow pyramid were the toughest I ever took. My breath heaved in and out of me in useless gasps, and I could hear the brain cells popping off by the thousands, *snap crackle pop*. We were nearing the peak, a triangular dome of pure snow; but I had to slow down.

Kunga forged on ahead of us, picking up speed in the last approach. Looking down at the snow, I lost sight of him. Then his boots came into my field of vision, and I realized we were there, just a couple steps below the top.

The actual summit was a ridged mound of snow about eight feet long

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and four feet wide. It wasn't a pinnacle, but it wasn't a broad hilltop either; you wouldn't have wanted to dance on it.

"Well," I said. "Here we are." I couldn't get excited about it. "Too bad I didn't bring a camera." The truth was, I didn't feel a thing.

Beside me Freds stirred. He tapped my arm, gestured up at Kunga Norbu. We were still below him, with our heads at about the level of his boots. He was humming, and had his arms extended up and out, as if conducting a symphony out to the east. I looked in that direction. By this time it was late afternoon, and Everest's shadow extended to the horizon, even above. There must have been ice particles in the air to the east, because all of a sudden above the darkness of Everest's shadow I saw a big icebow. It was almost a complete circle of color, much more diaphanous than a rainbow, cut off at the bottom by the mountain's triangular shadow.

Inside this round bow of faint color, on the top of the dark air of the shadow peak, there was a cross of light-haloed shadow. It was a Spectre of the Brocken phenomenon, caused when low sunlight throws the shadows of peaks and climbers onto moisture-filled air, creating a glory of light around the shadows. I had seen one before.

Then Kunga Norbu flicked his hands to the sides, and the whole vision disappeared, instantly.

"Whoah," I said.

"Right on," Freds murmured, and led me the last painful steps onto the peak itself, so that we stood beside Kunga Norbu. His head was thrown back, and on his face was a smile of pure, child-like bliss.

Now, I don't know what really happened up there. Maybe I went faint and saw colors for a moment, thought it was an icebow, and then blinked things clear. But I know that at that moment, looking at Kunga Norbu's transfigured face, I was quite sure that I had seen him gain his freedom, and paint it out there in the sky. The task was fulfilled, the arms thrown wide with joy . . . I believed all of it. I swallowed, a sudden lump in my throat.

Now I felt it too; I felt where we were. We had climbed Chomolungma. We were standing on the peak of the world.

Freds heaved his breath in and out a few times. "Well!" he said, and shook mittened hands with Kunga and me. "We did it!" And then we pounded each other on the back until we almost knocked ourselves off the mountain.

XV

We hadn't been up there long when I began to consider the problem

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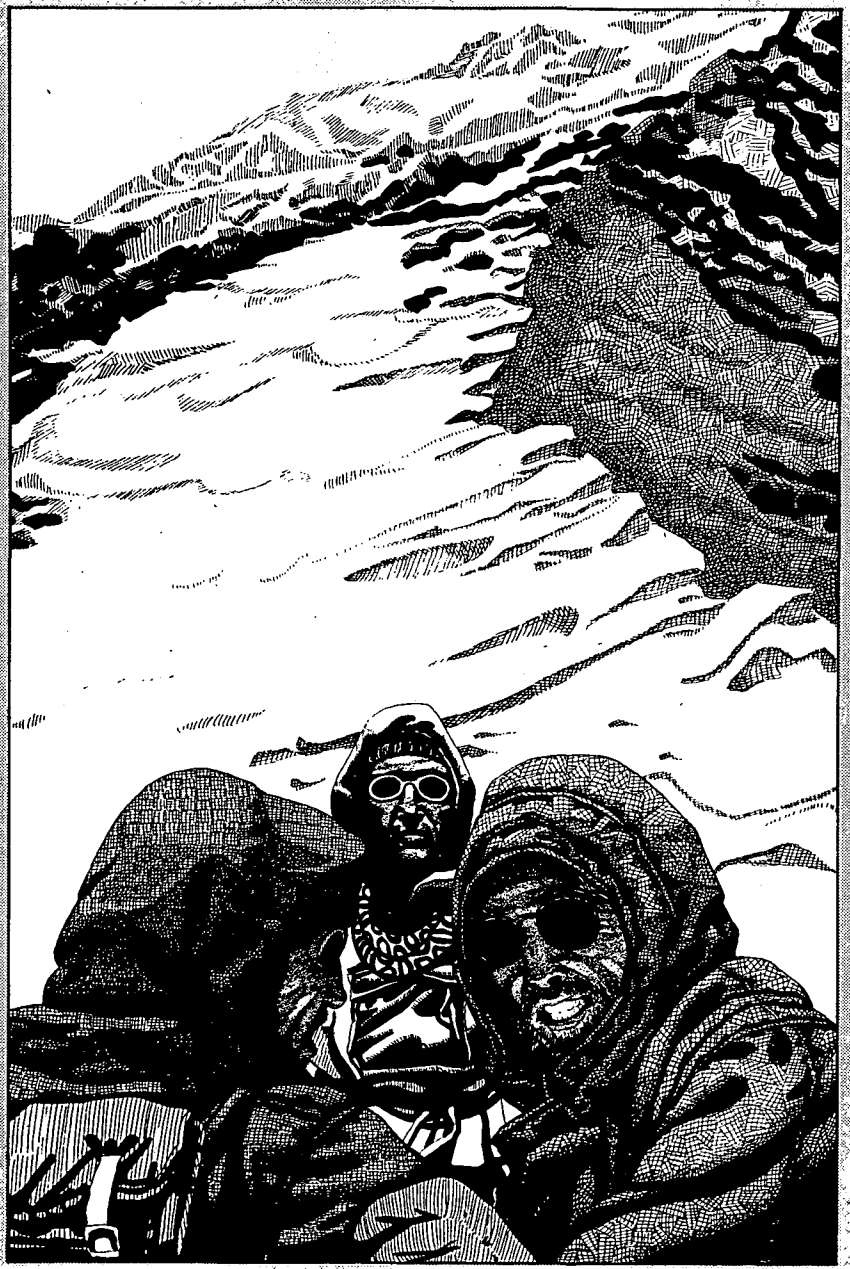

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of getting down. There wasn't much left of the day, and we were a long way from anywhere homey. "What now?"

"I think we'd better go down to the South Summit and dig a snow cave for the night. That's the closest place we can do it, and that's what Haston and Scott did in '75. It worked for them, and a couple other groups too."

"Fine," I said. "Let's do it."

Freds said something to Kunga, and we started down. Immediately I found that the Southeast Ridge was not as broad or as gradual as the West Ridge. In fact we were descending a kind of snow-covered knife edge, with ugly gray rocks sticking out of it. So this was the yak route! It was a tough hour's work to get down to the South Summit, and the only thing that made it possible was the fact that we were going downhill all the way.

The South Summit is a big jog in the Southeast Ridge, which makes for a lump of a subsidiary peak, and a flat area. Here we had a broad sloping expanse of very deep, packed snow—perfect conditions for a snow cave.

Freds got his little aluminum shovel out of his pack and went to it, digging like a dog after a bone. I was content to sit and consult. Kunga Norbu stood staring around at the infinite expanse of peaks, looking a little dazed. Once or twice I summoned up the energy to spell Freds. After a body-sized entryway, we only wanted a cave big enough for the three of us to fit in. It looked a bit like a coffin for triplets.

The sun set, stars came out, the twilight turned midnight blue; then it was night. And seriously, seriously cold. Freds declared the cave ready and I crawled in after him and Kunga, feeling granules of snow crunch under me. We banged heads and got arranged on our butt pads so that we were sitting in a little circle, on a rough shelf above our entrance tunnel, in a roughly spherical chamber. By slouching I got an inch's clearance above. "All right," Freds said wearily. "Let's party." He took the stove from his pack, held it in his mittens for a while to warm the gas inside, then set it on the snow in the middle of the three of us, and lit it with his lighter. The blue glare was blinding, the roar deafening. We took off our mitts and cupped our hands so there was no gap between flame and flesh. Our cave began to warm up a little.

You may think it odd that a snow cave can warm up at all, but remember we are speaking relatively here. Outside it was dropping to about 10 below 0, Fahrenheit. Add any kind of wind and at that altitude, where oxygen is so scarce, you'll die. Inside the cave, however, there was no wind. Snow itself is not that cold, and it's a great insulator: it will warm up, even begin to get slick on its surface, and that water also holds heat very well. Add a stove raging away, and three bodies struggling to pump out their 98.6, and even with a hole connecting you to outside air,

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you can get the temperature well up into the 30s. That's colder than a refrigerator, but compared to 10 below it's beach weather.

So we were happy in our little cave, at first. Freds scraped some of the wall into his pot and cooked some hot lemon drink. He offered me some almonds, but I had no appetite whatsoever; eating an almond was the same as eating a coffee table to me. We were all dying for drink, though, and we drank the lemon mix when it was boiling, which at this elevation was just about bath temperature. It tasted like heaven.

We kept melting snow and drinking it until the stove sputtered and ran out of fuel. Only a couple of hours had passed, at most. I sat there in the pitch dark, feeling the temperature drop. My spirits dropped with it.

But Freds was by no means done with the party. His lighter scraped and by its light I saw him punch a hole in the wall and set a candle in it. He lit the candle, and its light reflected off the slick white sides of our home. He had a brief discussion with Kunga Norbu.

"Okay," he said to me at the end of it, breath cascading whitely into the air. "Kunga is going to do some *tumo* now."

"Tumo?"

"Means, the art of warming oneself without fire up in the snows."

That caught my interest. "Another lama talent?"

"You bet. It comes in handy for naked hermits in the winter."

"I can see that. Tell him to lay it on us."

With some crashing about Kunga got in the lotus position, an impressive feat with his big snow boots still on.

He took his mitts off, and we did the same. Then he began breathing in a regular, deep rhythm, staring at nothing. This went on for almost half an hour, and I was beginning to think we would all freeze before he warmed up, when he held his hands out toward Freds and me. We took them in our own.

They were as hot as if he had a terrible fever. Fearfully I reached up to touch his face—it was warm, but nothing like his hands. "My Lord," I said.

"We can help him now," Freds said softly. "You have to concentrate, harness the energy that's always inside you. Every breath out you push away pride, anger, hatred, envy, sloth, stupidity. Every breath in, you take in Buddha's spirit, the five wisdoms, everything good. When you've gotten clear and calm, imagine a golden lotus in your belly button . . . Okay? In that lotus you imagine the syllable *ram*, which means fire. Then you have to see a little seed of flame, the size of a goat dropping, appearing in the *ram*. Every breath after that is like a bellows, fanning that flame, which travels through the *tsas* in the body, the mystic nerves. Imagine this process in five stages. First, the *uma tsa* is seen as

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a hair of fire, up your spine more or less . . . Two, the nerve is as big around as your little finger . . . Three, it's the size of an arm . . . Four, the body becomes the *tsa* itself and is perceived as a tube of fire . . . Five, the *tsa* engulfs the world, and you're just one flame in a sea of fire."

"My Lord."

We sat there holding Kunga Norbu's fiery hands, and I imagined myself a tube of fire: and the warmth poured into me—up my arms, through my torso—it even thawed my frozen butt, and my feet. I stared at Kunga Norbu, and he stared right though the wall of our cave to eternity, or wherever, his eyes glowing faintly in the candlelight. It was weird.

I don't know how long this went on—it seemed endless, although I suppose it was no more than an hour or so. But then it broke off—Kunga's hand cooled, and so did the rest of us. He blinked several times and shook his head.

He spoke to Freds.

"Well," Freds said. "That's about as long as he can hold it, these days."

"What?"

"Well . . . " He clucked his tongue regretfully. "It's like this. Tulkus tend to lose their powers, over the course of several incarnations. It's like they lose something in the process, every time, like when you keep making a tape from copies or whatever. There's a name for it."

"Transmission error," I said.

"Right. Well, it gets them too. In fact you run into a lot of tulkus in Tibet who are complete morons. Kunga is better than that, but he is a bit like Paul Revere. A little light in the belfry, you know. A great lama, and a super guy, but not tremendously powerful at any of the mystic disciplines, any more."

"Too bad."

"I know."

I recalled Kunga's fiery hands, their heat pronging into me. "So . . . he really is a tulku, isn't he."

"Oh yeah! Of course! And now he's free of old Tilopa, too—a lama in his own right, and nobody's disciple. It must be a great feeling."

"I bet. So how does it work again, exactly?"

"Becoming a tulku?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's a matter of concentrating your mental powers. Tibetans believe that none of this is supernatural, but just a focusing of natural powers that we all have. Tulkus have gotten their psychic energies incredibly focused, and when you're at that stage, you can leave your body whenever you want. Why if Kunga wanted to, he could die in about ten seconds."

"Useful."

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"Yeah. So when they decide to go, they hop off into the Bardo. The Bardo is the other world, the world of spirit, and it's a confusing place—talk about hallucinations! First a light like God's camera flash goes off in your face. Then it's just a bunch of colored paths, apparitions, everything. When Kunga describes it it's really scary. Now if you're just an ordinary spirit, then you can get disoriented, and be reborn as a slug or a game show host or *anything*. But if you stay focused, you're reborn in the body you choose, and you go on from there."

I nodded dully. I was tired, and cold, and the lack of oxygen was making me stupid and spacy; I couldn't make sense of Freds's explanations, although it may be that that would have happened anywhere.

We sat there. Kunga hummed to himself. It got colder.

The candle guttered, then went out.

It was dark. It continued to get colder.

After a while there was nothing but the darkness, our breathing, and the cold. I couldn't feel my butt or my legs below the knee. I knew I was waiting for something, but I had forgotten what it was. Freds stirred, started speaking Tibetan with Kunga. They seemed a long way away. They spoke to people I couldn't see. For a while Freds jostled about, punching the sides of the cave. Kunga shouted out hoarsely, things like "Hak!" and "Phut!"

"What are you doing?" I roused myself to say.

"We're fighting off demons," Freds explained.

I was ready to conclude, by watching my companions, that lack of oxygen drove one nuts; but what was my basis for comparison? My sample was skewed.

Some indeterminate time later Freds started shoveling snow out of the tunnel. "Casting out demons?" I inquired.

"No, trying to get warm. Want to try it?"

I didn't have the energy to move.

Then he shook me from side to side, switched to English, told me stories. Story after story, in a dry, hoarse, frog's voice. I didn't understand any of them. I had to concentrate on fighting the cold. On breathing. Freds became agitated, he told me a story of Kunga's, something about running across Tibet with a friend, a *lung-gom-pa* test of some kind, and the friend was wearing chains to keep from floating away entirely. Then something about running into a young husband at night, dropping the chains in a campfire . . . "The porters knew about *lung-gom,* and the next morning they must have tried to explain it to the British. Can you imagine it? Porters trying to explain these chains come out of nowhere . . . explaining they were used by people running across Tibet, to keep from going orbital? Man, those Brits must've thought they were invading Oz. Don't you think so? Hey, George?George? . . . George?"

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But finally the night passed, and I was still there.

We crawled out of our cave in the pre-dawn light, and stamped our feet until some sensation came back into them, feeling pretty pleased with ourselves. "Good morning!" Kunga Norbu said to me politely. He was right about that. There were high cirrus clouds going pink above us, and an ocean of blue cloud far below in Nepal, with all the higher white peaks poking out of it like islands, and slowly turning pink themselves. I've never seen a more otherwordly sight; it was as if we had climbed out of our cave onto the side of another planet.

"Maybe we should just shoot down to the South Col and join those Indian Army guys," Freds croaked. "I don't much feel like going back up to the peak to get to the West Ridge."

"You aren't kidding," I said.

So down the Southeast Ridge we went.

Now Peter Habeler, Messner's partner on the first oxygenless ascent of Everest in 1979, plunged down this ridge from the summit to the South Col in *one hour*. He was worried about brain damage; my feeling is that the speed of his descent is evidence it had already occurred. We went as fast as we could, which was pretty alarmingly fast, and it still took us almost three hours. One step after another, down a steep snowy ridge. I refused to look at the severe drops to right and left. The clouds below were swelling up like the tide in the Bay of Fundy; our good weather was about to end.

I felt completely disconnected from my body, I just watched it do its thing. Below Freds kept singing "Close to the Edge." We came to a big snow-filled gully and glissaded down it carelessly, sliding twenty or thirty feet with each dreamy step. All three of us were staggering by this point. Cloud poured up the Western Cwm, and mist magically appeared all around us, but we were just above the South Col by this time, and it didn't matter.

I saw there was a camp in the col, and breathed a sigh of relief. We would have been goners without it.

The Indians were still securing their tents as we walked up. A week's perfect weather, and they had just gotten into the South Col. Very slow, I thought as we approached. Siege-style assault, logistical pyramid, play it safe—slow as building the other kind of pyramid.

As we crossed the col and closed on the tents, navigating between piles of junk from previous expeditions, I began to worry. You see, the Indian Army has had incredible bad luck on Everest. They have tried to climb it several times, and so far as I know, they've never succeeded. Mostly this is because of storms, but people tend to ignore that, and the Indians

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have come in for a bit of criticism from the climbing community in Nepal. In fact they've been called terrible climbers. So they are a little touchy about this, and it was occurring to me, very slowly, that they might not be too amused to be greeted in the South Col by three individuals who had just bagged the peak on an overnighter from the north side.

Then one of them saw us. He dropped the mallet in his hand.

"Hi there!" Freds croaked.

A group of them quickly gathered around us. The wind was beginning to blow hard, and we all stood at an angle into it. The oldest Indian there, probably a major, shouted gruffly, "Who are you!"

"We're lost," Freds said. "We need help."

Ah, good, I thought. Freds has also thought of this problem. He won't tell them where we've been. Freds is still thinking. He will take care of this situation for us.

"Where did you come from?" the major boomed.

Freds gestured down the Western Cwm. Good, I thought. "Our Sherpas told us to keep turning right. So ever since Jomosom we have been."

"Where did you say!"

"Jomosom!"

The major drew himself up. "Jomosom," he said sharply, "is in *western* Nepal."

"Oh," Freds said.

And we all stood there. Apparently that was it for Freds's explanation.

I elbowed him aside. "The truth is, we thought it would be fun to help you. We didn't know what we were getting into."

"Yeah!" Freds said, accepting this new tack thankfully. "Can we carry a load down for you, maybe?"

"We are still climbing the mountain!" the major barked. "We don't need loads carried down!" He gestured at the ridge behind us, which was disappearing in mist. "This is Everest!"

Freds squinted at him. "You're kidding."

I elbowed him. "We need help," I said.

The major looked at us closely. "Get in the tent," he said at last.

XVII

Well, eventually I concocted a semi-consistent story about us idealistically wanting to porter loads for an Everest expedition, although who would be so stupid as to want to do that I don't know. Freds was no help at all—he kept forgetting and going back to his first story, saying things like, "We must have gotten on the wrong plane." And neither of us could

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fit Kunga Norbu into our story very well; I claimed he was our guide, but we didn't understand his language. He very wisely stayed mute.

Despite all that, the Indian team fed us and gave us water to slake our raging thirst, and they escorted us back down their fixed ropes to the camps below, to make sure they got us out of there. Over the next couple of days they led us all the way down the Western Cwm and the Khumbu Icefall to Base Camp. I wish I could give you a blow-by-blow account of the fabled Khumbu Icefall, but the truth is I barely remember it. It was big and white and scary; I was tired. That's all I know. And then we were in their base camp, and I knew it was over. First illegal ascent of Everest.

XVIII

Well, after what we had been through, Gorak Shep looked like Ireland, and Pheriche looked like Hawaii. And the air was oxygen soup.

We kept asking after the Brits and Arnold and Laure, and kept hearing that they were a day or so below us. From the sound of it the Brits were chasing Arnold, who was managing by extreme efforts to stay ahead of them. So we hurried after them.

On our way down, however, we stopped at the Pengboche Monastery, a dark, brooding old place in a little nest of black pine trees, supposed to be the chin whiskers of the first abbot. There we left Kunga Norbu, who was looking pretty beat. The monks at the monastery made a big to-do over him. He and Freds had an emotional parting, and he gave me a big grin as he bored me through one last time with that spacy black gaze. "Good morning!" he said, and we were off.

So Freds and I tromped down to Namche, which reminded me strongly of Manhattan, and found our friends had just left for Lukla, still chasing Arnold. Below Namche we really hustled to catch up with them, but we didn't succeed until we reached Lukla itself. And then we only caught the Brits—because they were standing there by the Lukla airstrip, watching the last plane of the day hum down the tilted grass and ski jump out over the deep gorge of the Dudh Kosi—while Arnold McConnell, we quickly found out, was on that plane, having paid a legitimate passenger a fat stack of rupees to replace him. Arnold's Sherpa companions were lining the strip and waving good-bye to him; they had all earned about a year's wages in this one climb, it turned out, and they were pretty fond of old Arnold.

The Brits were not. In fact they were fuming.

"Where have you been?" Trevor demanded.

"Well . . ." we said.

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"We went to the top," Freds said apologetically. "Kunga had to for religious reasons."

"Well," Trevor said huffily. "We considered it ourselves, but *we* had to chase *your* client back down the mountain to try and get his film. The film that will get us all kicked out of Nepal for good if it's ever shown."

"Better get used to it," Mad Tom said gloomily. "He's off to Kathmandu, and we're not. We'll never catch him now."

Now the view from Lukla is nothing extraordinary, compared to what you can see higher up; but there are the giant green walls of the gorge, and to the north you can see a single scrap of the tall white peaks beyond; and to look at all that, and think you might never be allowed to see it again. . . .

I pointed to the south. "Maybe we just got lucky."

"What?"

Freds laughed. "Choppers! Incoming! Some trekking outfit has hired helicopters to bring its group in."

It was true. This is fairly common practice, I've done it myself many times. RNAC's daily flights to Lukla can't fulfill the need during the peak trekking season, so the Nepali Air Force kindly rents out its helicopters, at exorbitant fees. Naturally they prefer not to go back empty, and they'll take whoever will pay. Often, as on this day, there is a whole crowd clamoring to pay to go back, and the competition is fierce, although I for one am unable to understand what people are so anxious to get back to.

Anyway, this day was like most of them, and there was a whole crowd of trekkers sitting around on the unloading field by the airstrip, negotiating with the various Sherpa and Sherpani power brokers who run the airport and get people onto flights. The hierarchy among these half-dozen power brokers is completely obscure, even to them, and on this day as always each of them had a list of people who had paid up to a hundred dollars for a lift out; and until the brokers discussed it with the helicopter crew, no one knew who was going to be the privileged broker given the go-ahead to march his clients on board. The crowd found this protocol ambiguous at best, and they were milling about and shouting ugly things at their brokers as the helicopters were sighted.

So this was not a good situation for us, because although we were desperate, everyone else wanting a lift claimed to be desperate also, and no one was going to volunteer to give up their places. Just before the two Puma choppers made their loud and windy landing, however, I saw Heather on the unloading field, and I ran over and discovered that she had gotten our expedition booked in with Pemba Sherpa, one of the most powerful brokers there. "Good work, Heather!" I cried. Quickly I explained to her some aspects of the situation, and looking wide-eyed at

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us—we were considerably filthier and more sunburnt than when we last saw her—she nodded her understanding.

And sure enough, in the chaos of trekkers milling about the choppers, in all that moaning and groaning and screaming and shouting to be let on board, it was Pemba who prevailed over the other brokers. And Want To Take You Higher Ltd.'s "Video Expedition to Everest Base Camp"—with the addition of four British climbers and an American—climbed on board the two vehicles, cheering all the way. With a *thukka thukka thukka* we were off.

"Now how will we find him in Kathmandu?" Marion said over the noise.

"He won't be expecting you," I said. "He thinks he's on the last flight of the day. So I'd start at the Kathmandu Guest House, where we were staying, and see if you can find him there."

The Brits nodded, looking grim as commandos. Arnold was in trouble.

XIX

We landed at the Kathmandu airport an hour later, and the Brits zipped out and hired a taxi immediately. Freds and I hired another one and tried to keep up, but the Brits must have been paying their driver triple, because that little Toyota took off over the dirt roads between the airport and the city like it was in a motorcross race. So we fell behind, and by the time we were let off in the courtyard of the Kathmandu Guest House, their taxi was already gone. We paid our driver and walked in and asked one of the snooty clerks for Arnold's room number, and when he gave it to us we hustled on up to the room, on the third floor overlooking the back garden.

We got there in the middle of the action. John and Mad Tom and Trevor had Arnold trapped on a bed in the corner, and they were standing over him not letting him go anywhere. Marion was on the other side of the room doing the actual demolition, taking up video cassettes one at a time and stomping them under her boot. There was a lot of yelling going on, mostly from Marion and Arnold. "*That's* the one of me taking my bath," Marion said. "And *that's* the one of me changing my shirt in my tent. And *that's* the one of me taking a pee at eight thousand meters!" and so on, while Arnold was shouting "No, no!" and "Not that one, my God!" and "I'll sue you in every court in Nepal!"

"Foreign nationals can't sue each other in Nepal," Mad Tom told him.

But Arnold continued to shout and threaten and moan, his suntorched face going incandescent, his much-reduced body bouncing up and down on the bed, his big round eyes popping out till I was afraid they would

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burst, or fall down on springs. He picked up the fresh cigar that had fallen from his mouth and threw it between Trevor and John, hitting Marion in the chest.

"Molester," she said, dusting her hands with satisfaction. "That's all of them, then." She began to stuff the wreckage of plastic and videotape into a daypack. "And we'll take this along, too, thank you very much."

"Thief," Arnold croaked.

The three guys moved away from him. Arnold sat there on the bed, frozen, staring at Marion with a stricken, bug-eyed expression. He looked like a balloon with a pinprick in it.

"Sorry, Arnold," Trevor said. "But you brought this on yourself, as you must admit. We told you all along we didn't want to be filmed."

Arnold stared at them speechlessly.

"Well, then," Trevor said. "That's that." And they left.

Freds and I watched Arnold sit there. Slowly his eyes receded back to their usual pop-eyed position, but he still looked disconsolate.

"Them Brits are tough," Freds offered. "They're not real sentimental people."

"Come on, Arnold," I said. Now that he was no longer my responsibility, now that we were back, and I'd never have to see him again—now that it was certain his videotape, which could have had Freds and me in as much hot water as the Brits, was destroyed—I felt a little bit sorry for him. Just a little bit. It was clear from his appearance that he had really gone through a lot to get that tape. Besides, I was starving. "Come on, let's all get showered and shaved and cleaned up, and then I'll take you out to dinner."

"Me too," said Freds.

Arnold nodded mutely.

XX

Kathmandu is a funny city. When you first arrive there from the West, it seems like the most ramshackle and unsanitary place imaginable: the buildings are poorly constructed of old brick, and there are weed patches growing out of the roofs; the hotel rooms are bare pits; all the food you can find tastes like cardboard, and often makes you sick; and there are sewage heaps here and there in the mud streets, where dogs and cows are scavenging. It really seems primitive.

Then you go out for a month or two in the mountains, or a trek or a climb. And when you return to Kathmandu, the place is utterly transformed. The only likely explanation is that while you were gone they took the city away and replaced it with one that looks the same on the

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outside, but is completely different in substance. The accommodations are luxurious beyond belief; the food is superb; the people look prosperous, and their city seems a marvel of architectural sophistication. Kathmandu! What a metropolis!

So it seemed to Freds and me, as we checked into my home away from home, the Hotel Star. As I sat on the floor under the waist-high tap of steaming hot water that emerged from my shower, I found myself giggling in mindless rapture, and from the next room I could hear Freds bellowing the old 50s rocker, "Going to Katmandu."

An hour later, hair wet, faces chopped up, skin all prune-shriveled, we met Arnold out in the street and walked through the Thamel evening. "We look like coatracks!" Freds observed. Our city clothes were hanging on us. Freds and I had each lost about twenty pounds, Arnold about thirty. And it wasn't just fat, either. Everything wastes away at altitude. "We'd better get to the Old Vienna and put some of it back on."

I started salivating at the very thought of it.

So we went to the Old Vienna Inn, and relaxed in the warm steamy atmosphere of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After big servings of goulash, schnitzel Parisienne, and apple strudel with whipped cream, we sat back sated. Sensory overload. Even Arnold was looking up a little. He had been quiet through the meal, but then again we all had, being busy.

We ordered a bottle of rakshi, which is a potent local beverage of indeterminate origin. When it came we began drinking.

Freds said, "Hey, Arnold, you're looking better."

"Yeah, I don't feel so bad." He wiped his mouth with a napkin streaked all red; we had all split our sun-destroyed lips more than once, trying to shovel the food in too fast. He got set to start the slow process of eating another cigar, unwrapping one very slowly. "Not so bad at all." And then he grinned; he couldn't help himself; he grinned so wide that he had to grab the napkin and staunch the flow from his lips again.

"Well, it's a shame those guys stomped your movie," Freds said.

"Yeah, well." Arnold waved an arm expansively. "That's life."

I was amazed. "Arnold, I can't believe this is you talking. Here those guys took your videotape of all that *suffering* you just put us through, and they *stomp* it, and you say, 'That's life'?"

He took a long hit of the rakshi. "Well," he said, waggling his eyebrows up and down fiendishly. He leaned over the table toward us. "They got one copy of it, anyway."

Freds and I looked at each other.

"Couple hundred dollars of tape there that they crunched. I suppose I ought to bill them for it. But I'm a generous guy; I let it pass."

"One copy?" I said.

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"Yeah." He tipped his head. "Did you see that box, kind of like a suitcase, there in the corner of my room at the Guesthouse?"

We shook our heads.

"Neither did the Brits. Not that they would have recognized it. It's a video splicer, mainly. But a copier too. You stick a cassette in there and push a button and it copies the cassette for storage, and then you can do all your splicing off the master. You make your final tape that way. Great machine. Most freelance video people have them now, and these portable babies are really the latest. Saved my ass, in this case."

"Arnold," I said. "You're going to get those guys in trouble! And us too!"

"Hey," he warned, "I've got the splicer under lock and key, so don't get any ideas."

"Well you're going to get us banned from Nepal for good!"

"Nah. I'll give you all stage names. You got any preferences along those lines?"

"Arnold!" I protested.

"Hey, listen," he said, and drank more rakshi. "Most of that climb was in Tibet, right? Chinese aren't going to be worrying about it. Besides, you know the Nepali Ministry of Tourism—can you really tell me they'll ever get it together to even see my film, much less take names from it and track those folks down when they next apply for a visa? Get serious!"

"Hmm," I said, consulting with my rakshi.

"So what'd you get?" Freds asked.

"*Everything*. I got some good long-distance work of you guys finding the body up there—ha!—you thought I didn't get that, right? I tell you I was filming your *thoughts* up there! I got that, and then the Brits climbing on the ridge—everything. I'm gonna make stars of you all."

Freds and I exchanged a relieved glance. "Remember about the stage names," I said.

"Sure. And after I edit it you won't be able to tell where on the mountain the body was, and with the names and all, I really think Marion and the rest will love it. Don't you? They were just being shy. Old fashioned! I'm going to send them all prints of the final product, and they're gonna love it. Marion in particular. She's gonna look beautiful." He waved the cigar and a look of cowlike yearning disfigured his face. "In fact, tell you a little secret, I'm gonna accompany that particular print in person, and make it part of my proposal to her. I think she's kind of fond of me, and I bet you anything she'll agree to marry me when she sees it, don't you think?"

"Sure," Freds said. "Why not?" He considered it. "Or if not in this life, then in the next."

Arnold gave him an odd look. "I'm going to ask her along on my next

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trip, which looks like it'll be China and Tibet. You know how the Chinese have been easing up on the Tibetan religions lately? Well, the clerk at the Guest House gave me a telegram on my way out—my agent tells me that the authorities in Lhasa have decided they're going to rebuild a whole bunch of Buddhist monasteries that they tore down during the Cultural Revolution, and it looks like I'll be allowed to film some of it. That should make for a real heart-string basher, and I bet Marion would love to see it, don't you?"

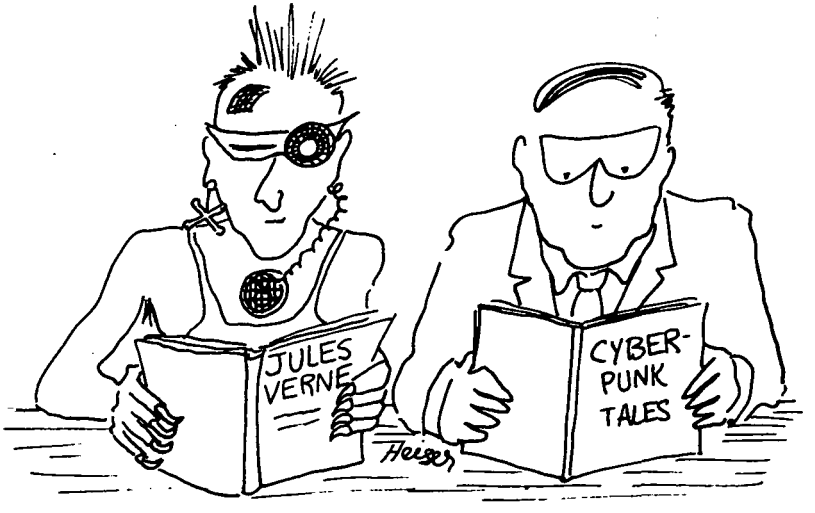
Freds and I grinned at each other. "*I'd* love to see it," Freds declared. "Here's to the monasteries, and a free Tibet!"

We toasted the idea, and ordered another bottle.

Arnold waved his cigar. "Meanwhile, this Mallory stuff is dynamite. It's gonna make a hell of a movie."

XXI

Which is why I can tell you about this one—the need for secrecy is going to be blown right out the window as soon as they air Arnold's film, *Nine Against Everest: Seven Men, One Woman, and a Corpse.* I hear both PBS and the BBC have gone for it, and it should be on any day now. Check local listings for times in your area. ●



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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

DREAMS OF SPACE

The French critic Michel Butor once suggested quite seriously (or at least in perfect deadpan) that science fiction writers get together, agree on a desirable consensus future, and then, by setting all their stories and novels in this collective dreamworld, imprint it upon the public consciousness and thereby call it into being.

It seemed rather silly at the time, though, in a sense, the flip side had long been practiced in the Soviet Union under the esthetic rubric of "Socialist Realism."

There, instead of *writers* getting together to agree on a censensus future, the parameters of that future are supplied by the Communist Party, and anything that violates them too egregiously, anything that might tend to warp the collective dreamworld of the masses beyond the theoretical bounds of official Marxist reality, is simply not published. Soviet science fiction writers certainly do not set all their stories in the same consistent future, but they are forced to set all their stories in futures that are consistently Soviet, which is to say, at least not *inconsistent* with the long range utopian goals of Party ideology. We in the West may shake our heads ruefully at the constraints under which our Soviet colleagues must labor, for while science fiction extolling the virtues of Communism or the USSR may not exactly be overflowing our racks, works critical of our own society and its official reality certainly are, nor do their authors find themselves chopping rocks in a gulag, or at least not yet.

On the other hand, a certain "Butorism" *has* crept into American science fiction over the past decade or so. It all seems to have begun with Gerard O'Neil.

O'Neil, of course, is the Princeton professor who set his students the task of designing a space colony and ended up so convinced of the result's practical viability that he became dedicated to getting the "L-5 colony" built.

By now, the L-5 colony concept is probably understood in considerable detail by just about anyone who reads much science fiction and by many people who do not. A large cylindrical canister perhaps ten miles long stabilized at La Grange Point 5, equidistant from the Earth and the Moon. Rotated about its

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long axis to supply artificial gravity. Powered by solar collectors. Supplied with a self-contained more or less closed ecology. Built out of lunar material flung up to the vicinity of the L-5 point by a "mass-driver" or monster "rail gun" driven by a nuclear reactor. An artificial world with the population of a major city.

Needless to say most of the L-5 colony concept had been anticipated in science fiction. Space stations had long been a staple of the genre. The huge self-contained artificial world, at least in terms of the powered "generation ship," is a concept at least as old as Robert A. Heinlein's "Universe." Putting the thing at an Earth-Moon libration point instead of in a conventional orbit about an astronomical body may be new, but it was foreshadowed by George O. Smith's "Venus Equilateral" series, in which a space station is placed in stable position at a Venusian Trojan point. Even the lunar mass driver and its economic and political consequences were described in great detail in Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*.

In a sense then, O'Neil's L-5 concept was cobbled together out of decades worth of science fictional space colonies, or to put it another way, decades worth of science fiction had explored so many possible variations on this piece of macrotechnology, that just about anything O'Neil could have come up with would have been anticipated somewhere in the literature.

But O'Neil's design was quite specific and unique unto itself, just as Project Apollo, though long anticipated by science fiction in its generality and scattered detail, never quite appeared in the literature in its actual nuts and bolts and systems form.

And when the L-5 Society was founded as a lobbying group whose political goal was to actually get a space colony built, a strange new thing began to happen.

The dream of space has always been thematically central to American science fiction, and more, dear to the hearts of most of the people who wrote and read it as a vision of the future much to be desired in the real world. Science fiction, in point of actual fact if not by theoretical definition, could hardly be science fiction without it. If there is one collective value held by the "science fiction community" as a whole, it is a belief in our destiny as a space-faring species.

But of course far from agreeing on a consensus future in space and setting all these stories and novels in it, science fiction writers followed their own individual stars and created not a collective dream but a rich profusion of alternate futures and multiplex realities.

This view of "the future" as a multiplexity of possibilities rather than a collective dream castle awaiting only its construction to be moved into is of course science fiction's greatest strength as a visionary literature, without which it would long since have devolved

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into its own didactic version of Socialist Realism.

Nor did science fiction's refusal to champion a collective prescription for a space program vitiate its successful social role as a major spiritual and even mystical inspiration of Project Apollo.

For while science fiction never did predict the details of Project Apollo, let alone champion anything so apparently ludicrous as going to the Moon without building an orbital space station first, many were the astronauts and space scientists whose careers were set in motion by its multiple visions of space-faring futures.

But many SF writers supported the goal of the L-5 Society, some were active in the organization itself, and SF fandom, of course, was the most fertile ground for space lobby recruitment. Space lobbyists became part of the SF convention scene, the L-5 proposal became a popular panel item and topic of barroom conversation, and while M. Butor's proposal was never to my knowledge seriously advanced, he would no doubt have smiled contentedly at what evolved out of this general process.

The L-5 Colony became a collective consensus image.

The science fiction genre had evolved plenty of consensus images before. The interplanetary rocket. The robot. The wheel-shaped space station. Hyperdrive. The raygun. Hive mind. The list, though not endless, is quite extensive.

But never before had a specific engineering proposal injected itself like a virus into the species DNA of the genre, replicating itself in stories by many writers. Instead of frontier technology mirroring science fiction, science fiction was emulating and promoting the program of the L-5 Society.

L-5 Colonies abounded in stories and novels, and they were called just that, when they were not called "O'Neil Colonies." The place of Gerard O'Neil himself in future history became a given. Generally speaking, these fictional L-5 Colonies were all very much like each other, and were all pretty much as described by O'Neil.

Was this merely a matter of SF writers staying au courrant with space science and adopting the L-5 design as the obvious form of the large space colony?

Perhaps a certain intellectual laziness was indeed involved; easier to do a quick rewrite of O'Neil's detailed description of your setting than to reinvent the wheel from scratch. But on careful retrospective consideration, the L-5 concept is far from the optimum inevitable in space colony design.

For one thing, living around the interior circumference of a huge spinning cylinder in order to enjoy Earth-normal gravity means that most of the enclosed volume of your colony is useless empty space.

For another, I took considerable ribbing as an SF writer on the subject of "artificial gravity" from astronaut Wally Shirra at the Global Vision seminar in Tokyo.

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Centrifugal force is *not* the same thing as artificial gravity because your head is rotating somewhat slower than your feet and subject therefore to Coriolis forces, Shirra pointed out. And if you guys think the effect is negligible, try some of the actual experiments I took part in and you'll find your sense of balance quite destroyed.

The shorter the axis of rotation, the greater the gut-wrenching effect, the greater the length of the moment arm, the closer centrifugal "gravity" approaches the real thing.

Meaning that in terms of both geometrically efficient enclosure of *usable* space and achieving maximum rotation diameter with minimal mass, the good old wheel-shaped space station makes more sense than the cylindrical L-5 Colony. As with Project Apollo, those old SF stories were right, and the engineering designs were wrong.

Why then did the L-5 Colony achieve at least for a time the status of a consensus image à la M. Butor?

Precisely, I believe, for M. Butor's reason. A future for the human race in space had long been the central collective dream of science fiction. Project Apollo had validated the vision and given SF writers a perhaps exaggerated sense of their ability to evolve the national psyche towards its destiny in space. But Project Apollo had been a false first step, not our vision at all, and it had turned out to be a dead end in terms of our expansion into space.

The L-5 proposal, however, whatever its possible design flaws, had real world plausibility. Here was a detailed developer's blueprint for a city in space that could be built without real technological breakthroughs, a dream castle that those already born might expect to be able to move into. Timothy Leary even concocted a perhaps sardonic scheme to finance the building of the space development by pre-selling lots inside it.

Then too, this was the first time that the science fiction community had been subject to real lobbying, and lobbying for a cause, at least in general, to which it had long since already been converted.

The Butorism seemed relatively subtle. Readers were mercifully spared a flood of science fictional Socialist Realism depicting the heroic struggle of the scientists, workers, and SF fans to build utopia in space. Comparatively few of the stories and novels were directly *about* the construction of an L-5 Colony. Writers simply tended to write in O'Neil's projected artifact whenever the tale called for a colony in space. It was as innocent as the time-honored employment of "Tuckerisms," the injection of names or personas of real SF figures into fictional futures.

Or was it?

In retrospect, as we shall soon see, maybe not. For as science fiction writers began to use the L-5 Colony as a consensus setting, a kind of thematic consensus began to accrete around the artifact, a

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collective vision of the future of the solar system at least halfway to becoming an ideology.

Indeed, in certain quarters, that ideology was pre-existent. The American myth of the frontier is older than American science fiction. Long before the L-5 concept was even a gleam in O'Neil's eye, it had been moved to the Asteroid Belt by science fiction writers of a laissez faire libertarian bent.

The asteroids (colonial America or the Old West) were seen as the free frontier, the future of economic (and sometimes political) freedom, colonized by rugged individualists, and usually fighting for economic and/or political independence from wicked, degenerate, collectivist, played-out Earth (Old Europe or the Effete East). Out there in the Belt, with its limitless mineral resources, its low-g environment, and its wide open spaces, was the future of the species, and as for poor old polluted, over-populated, screwed-up Earth, well tough shit.

In part this myth of the "Free Asteroids" served as a venue for laissez faire libertarian political fables, but it was also in part a reflection of a certain viewpoint within the SF community, the one that divides the species into free-thinking, future-oriented SF fans (the Belters of the free frontier) and "mundanes," which is to say the rest of humanity (poor played out old Earth).

Not all of this stuff had a right-wing political message, and not all of it limited the frontier to the Asteroid Belt, but all of it displayed much the same attitude towards Earth and what it stood for. Poor old Earth was unsalvageable and at best must be left to stew in its own juices while the best and the brightest headed in the direction of Pluto. In John Varley's *The Ophiuchi Hotline* and related stories collected in *The Persistence of Vision*—by no means laissez faire screeds—powerful aliens have evicted humanity from Earth and forced the species to make its way as best it can in the solar suburbs.

The advent of the L-5 proposal and the lobbying efforts of the L-5 Society within the SF community pushed these tendencies to their logical extremes.

The L-5 Colony would be built with material from beyond Earth's gravity well. It would have its own self-contained ecology and draw its energy from the sun. It would be a brand new world entire, a new start, fashioned entirely by the hand of man, completely self-sufficient, a society independent not only from Earth but from reliance upon the resources of any planetary surface, from geology, weather, the natural realm itself.

"Planetary chauvinism" became a buzzword, meaning that the future of the species lay in self-created artificial worlds, that while the mundanes were left to stew in their own screw-ups on Earth, star-faring man would conquer not so much other planets as the tabula rasa of space itself. In his novelette "Tricentennial" and his novel tril-

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ogy aptly titled "Worlds," Joe Haldeman fits propulsion systems on his space habitats and send them toward the stars, artificial worlds independent of even the sun, itself.

What was more, what was *much* more, SF writers and readers felt that this was a dream world they could actually build for themselves precisely as Michel Butor suggested. Detailed engineering plans for the L-5 Colony existed, given the money and political commitment it could be built well within the lifetimes of those now living, a lobbying effort to build a constituency for the funding was already under way, science fiction had helped to successfully inspire Project Apollo, and so, if the SF community, if SF writers, did their bit, why we might actually get to *live* in our collective vision, we might actually be able to leave the mundacity of Earth and move into our dream castle in space, become the heroes and heroines of our own science fiction stories.

Had the collective image of the L-5 Colony merely been adopted as a convenient hardware convention within which to explore the diverse possibilities of social and political evolution which might take place in such independent enclosed pocket universes, the genre might have suffered no worse than a certain circumscription of technological extrapolation in the service of its collective idealism.

But fiction, even science fiction, is not written in a political and social vacuum, and in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the bulk of this stuff was being written, America was sliding into economic decline, the prosperous middle class was under financial and social pressure, and the collective utopian dream of the L-5 Colony reflected the longings of the beleagured middle class.

There was a sameness to most of these L-5 Colonies, a sameness of more than technological framework, a sameness mirrored nicely in the title of Somtow Sucharitkul's "Mallworld" series, a uniformity of social vision epitomized, with weird appropriateness, by the closed society of "Todos Santos," the huge self-contained habitat in *Oath of Fealty*, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle.

Weird because Todos Santos is not an L-5 Colony but a kind of "Festung Los Angeles," a giant self-contained suburb-cum-fortress plunked down in the festering midst of a socially, politically, and economically degenerate future L.A., "Mallworld" with a vengeance. Appropriate because *Oath of Fealty* quite openly and with sophisticated political consciousness depicts the middle class vision of beleagured technocratic utopia surrounded by lumpenproletarian social degeneracy that other writers placed in outer space.

It's all there in words of one syllable. Todos Santos is bright and clean and shiny and technologically up to date. It is a corporate utopia run with tight but unobtru-

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sive security by dedicated technocrats. It is entirely self-contained, a pocket universe that, if fitted with artificial gravity and a life-support system and boosted out of the gravity well, would be rather indistinguishable from a space colony. No slums. No sleazy red-light districts. Openly designed as a safe, secure, rather antiseptic middle-class fortress. Even the name means "All Saints" in Spanish, as if to declare that lesser social beings need not apply.

Thus the outcome of this stage of science fiction's affair with Butorism—a collective vision of bright, clean, ecologically, economically, and socially self-contained technocratic, middle class suburbs in space, with no poor people, no street gangs, no cockroaches, and no dog-shit on the streets. Vast spanking shopping malls and neat housing developments and not even freeway gridlock between. Floating airily unconcerned above a Third World favela called Earth.

"The street finds its own uses for technology."

—William Gibson

"If you want to imagine what an L-5 Colony would *really* be like, picture a Worldcon in a submarine forever."

—Norman Spinrad

Then came the cyberpunks.

Now while much has been written about the central cyberpunk ethos and about the paraphernalia of "cyberspace," "wetware," "implants," and "interfaces," including by yours truly, no one, including yours truly, seems to have much noticed something rather important that so-called cyberpunks like William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and John Shirley share with their supposed antitheses, so-called "humanists" like Kim Stanley Robinson, Michael Swanwick, and John Varley—a new collective vision of space colonization quite different from that of the L-5 enthusiasts.

I have before me eight rather recent novels—*The Memory of Whiteness* and *Icehenge* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *Eclipse* by John Shirley, *Voice of the Whirlwind* by Walter Jon Williams, *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* by William Gibson, *Schismatrix* by Bruce Sterling, and *Vacuum Flowers* by Michael Swanwick—all of which, viewed together, converge on quite a new conception of space colonization.

Sterling, Shirley, and Gibson are card-carrying cyberpunks (though Gibson has lately tried to burn his), Williams is writing in a similar mode, Robinson and Swanwick probably wouldn't be caught dead in mirror shades. Yet all of these novels are set in somewhat different versions of the same solar system, and somehow, Toto, I don't think we're in Mallworld, let alone Todos Santos.

All of these works are set a century or three in the future. In most of them, the action wanders about a thoroughly colonized solar system. Gibson, Williams, and Swanwick emphasize artificial habitats while Robinson places a bit more

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emphasis on asteroids and satellites, and Shirley sets most of the action on Earth, but in all of these books, the terraformed surfaces of major planets do not hold the bulk of humanity's extraterrestrial population.

In some of these novels, the solar system is a patchwork of independent states, in some a patchwork of corporate fiefdoms, in others a complex political melange of both, but in *none* of them does a system-wide government of any coherent sort prevail, nor does Earth dominate its far-flung sons and daughters.

Indeed, in most of these novels, Earth is either a backwater, a degenerate mess, a corporate battleground, or, in the case of *Vacuum Flowers,* even the homeland of a hive mind hostile to space-going man. In most of these novels, Earth's gravity well is something to escape from, and most of the characters would much prefer to live in a low or zero-g environment, rather than reproduce a one-g field artificially.

Who wrote what first and who influenced whom could be the subject of endless inconclusive debate, since all of these books were published within a four year span, and what with variable publishing lead-times, there's really no way of knowing who had already read what when they sat down to produce their own novel.

Of late, certain of the cyberpunks have been complaining that the purity of "the Movement" has been compromised by "derivative work," and one can certainly see the influence of Gibson on Williams, and particularly of Sterling's *Schismatrix* on Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers.* But on the other hand, Swanwick was beginning to work this area in novelette form before *Neuromancer* or *Schismatrix* were published, and the novellas that Robinson cobbled together into *Icehenge* predate them too.

Furthermore, aside from the shared vision of space, these are very different books by very different writers.

Eclipse is a forthrightly anti-fascist novel set mainly on Earth and intimately involved with rock and roll.

The Memory of Whiteness and *Icehenge* bop around the solar system; the latter is concerned with how lengthened life-span affects character, and the former, while thematically centered on music, is concerned with the classical variety and its relationship to metaphysics.

Count Zero is a sequel to *Neuromancer* and its focus is on Gibson's "Cyberspace." *Voice of the Whirlwind* is also supposed to be a sequel, to Williams' *Hardwired,* but this seems to be mostly a marketing ploy, since it is set further in the future, moves off the surface of the Earth, and includes no repeat characters or even references to same.

Schismatrix and *Vacuum Flowers* are the most similar to each other in terms of setting and straightforward style (and neither of them have what one could ra-

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tionally call a "punk" sensibility), but the former is centered on the radiation of humanity into biologically disparate but psychically rather similar daughter species, whereas the latter leaves the human form more or less as is but rings complex changes on the very concepts of "personality," "identity," and "being."

So in terms of style, theme, focus, politics, and esthetics, these novels are about as similar as say, *Dr. Strangelove, Bug Jack Barron, The Handmaid's Tale, Fail-Safe,* and *On Wings of Song,* all of which are set in the United States in the relatively near future.

But since *their* similar future venues are all entirely imaginary, they reflect not extrapolation from a shared real political geography but the outline of a new emerging collective vision of the human future in space, an alternative Butorism which seems to be gaining ascendancy within the genre.

All of them take place at least in part in artificial space habitats in the next two or three centuries and what they have in common is first the politically balkanized solar system in which these space habitats exist, and second, and most central to the present discussion, the nature of the space habitats themselves.

These space colonies are emphatically *not* clean spanking mallworlds; well-run, technocratic, middle class bastions in space, à la the collective vision inspired by Gerard O'Neil and the L-5 movement.

The one space habitat that Shirley shows us has a rigid class structure, a pre-revolutionary atmosphere, and all the neat, clean, well- maintained, middle class stability of Jersey City or Beirut. Gibson extends his corporately-balkanized Earthside culture seamlessly into space, along with its streetwise outlaw underbelly, and Williams does something similar. Robinson seems to be painting a superficially different picture. His solar system is thoroughly colonized and politically balkanized too, and what he gives us are no middle class housing developments in space either, but *Icehenge* and particularly *The Memory of Whiteness* present a more positive and prosperous vision, economically and especially esthetically, a richly complex and baroque version of solar man, more like the worlds of Jack Vance or the Second Starfaring Age of *The Void Captain's Tale* and *Child of Fortune* than the decaying space city of Shirley or Gibson's corporate social darwinism, perfectly epitomized by the baroque musical style at the thematic core of *The Memory of Whiteness.*

Swanwick's solar system in *Vacuum Flowers* lies somewhere in between. Once again we have political balkanization and a profusion of space habitats—moons, asteroids, artificial worlds in clusters and clouds, even "dyson worlds" in the Oort Cloud. But while a good

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many of them are fetid slums and the majority of them are literally barnacled with the irksome vaccum flowers of the title and none of them run with the antiseptic perfection of the ideal L-5 Colony, there is room inside for Robinson's high cultural style too.

And Swanwick's space habitats have a decidedly organic flavor. The vacuum flowers were originally designed to soak up the inevitable leakage of air and garbage for efficient recycling and grew out of control so that hulls need continual scraping. Giant mutated trees fill the interior spaces of many of them by design, forming complex three-dimensional mazes, forests with winding trails and unplanned peripatetic villages. These habitats really *are* little worlds in space, with all the chaotic unplanned complexity of living ecologies.

But it is Sterling's *Schismatrix* which was the earliest novel to fully present this new vision of space in its maximum diversity, it is thus far the only novel with this very vision at its thematic center, and because Sterling is the theoretical guru of the Cyberpunk Movement, it is the reason why there have arisen certain complaints that "non-Movement writers" are aping the "true cyberpunks" even though *Schismatrix* is light years away from Gibson and Shirley in terms of style, sensibility, theme, and superficial trappings.

Once again we have a profusion of diverse artificial worlds and balkanized political complexity, though here the ebb and flow of the fortunes of the two main human factions, the Mechs (cyborgers) and the Shapers (genetic engineers), give the politics a certain overall coherence over the novel's long time-span, while the constant shifting of sides in any given venue and the cross-currents of refugees finally create a melange not merely of cultures but of "daughter species" so complex that almost any somatic variation is possible.

And that is Sterling's thematic point, a point which may not be central to *Vacuum Flowers* or *Icehenge* or *The Memory of Whiteness,* but which is taken as a given by Robinson and Swanwick in the construction of their settings, and which has even been picked up by Gregory Benford and David Brin in *Heart of the Comet*—namely that given time, technology, and the human impulse towards diversity, the habitats we construct for ourselves in space—be they terraformed comets, asteroids, and moons or new man-made worlds entire—will sooner or later evolve into environments as ecologically complex, politically fragmented, and recomplicated as the so-called "natural realm," the mosaic of ecospheres, cultures, social classes, and ways of life we presently see on Earth.

If this new collective vision is a form of "Butorism" too, it is Butorism of a peculiarly paradoxical sort, different in kind, not merely in specific context, from the earlier

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version with its cookie-cutter O'Neil Colonies, and a vision at least partially extrapolated from a key element of the cyberpunk social ethos. And yet, strangely enough, it also serves to renovate science fiction's hoary romantic vision of our solar system as the venue of the infinite possible.

Way back when the Soviet and American space programs were only gleams in SF's collective eye, in the days of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Leigh Brackett, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, C.L. Moore, & Co., the solar system was an Arabian Nights fantasy, replete with dying Martian civilizations, Venusian jungles, space pirates, Elder Races, open-ended sense of wonder, and the promise of the infinite possible in our own stellar backyard.

The pictures and data from real planetary probes banished all these wonderful baroque possibilities from our solar system in terms of science fictional plausibility and relegated the wonderful worlds just beyond our gravity well to the far stars, to a literary dreamworld not even our children were likely to reach.

Gerard O'Neil and his L-5 proposal gave us a new vision of our future within the solar system; a reachable, attainable vision of bright, clean, well-ordered artificial worlds in space, an escape from the ecological pollution, resource depletion, poverty, collectivism, and unseemly, unplanned natural chaos of poor screwed-up old Earth.

But it was a pale shadow of what we seemed to have lost, a middle class, controlled, relentlessly suburban collective vision of our space-faring future—technocratic, enclosed, antiseptic, socially mean-spirited, reminiscent, somehow, of the bleak unadorned architectural futurism of the Bauhaus school, from which the romantic impulse and the organic sense of cultural ornamentation and social richness had been banished, along with ghettos, underclasses, countercultures, interesting nightlife, and dogshit in the streets, a future in which pallid order reigned triumphant over tasty chaos, Velveeta on Wonderbread, rather than a ripe runny brie messily smeared on crusty pumpernickel.

Cyberpunk was, among other things, a reaction against this well-ordered, denatured, inorganic, white middle class, essentially social fascist vision of the future, of high technology as inherently the property of the ruling power structure, as an instrumentality of social and political control, as the servant of order.

Uh-uh, says Gibson in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*. "The street finds its own uses for technology." Nor will technology eliminate the sensibility of the street, of underclasses, ghettos, countercultures, and class struggle, says Shirley in *Eclipse* and Williams in *Hardwired* and *Voice of the Whirlwind*.

And it's not just a matter of street culture, Robinson demonstrates in *Icehenge* and *The Memory of Whiteness*. As technology

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advances, as we not only move out into the solar system but attain the ability to mold worlds entire to our own desires, our cultures, even on the highest levels, will become *more* baroque, not more simplified, more chaotic in a positive esthetic sense, not more predictably ordered and boring.

Nor must we necessarily lose our oldest source of environmental surprise, recomplication, and unpredictability even in artificial space colonies, as Swanwick demonstrates in *Vacuum Flowers,* to wit ongoing organic evolution itself. We may genetically engineer the elements of artificial ecosystems, but precisely to the extent that they cohere as self-contained ecosystems, so will they develop the ability to mutate and adapt to the conditions of space habitations in ways we never predicted or intended. Even our designer organisms will find their own uses for technology, as Swanwick's "vacuum flowers" so puissantly demonstrate.

Indeed, as we see in *Schismatrix,* the advance of technology, the colonization of the solar system, the ability to construct worlds of any idiosyncratic design out of the void itself, and ultimately the power of human consciousness to redesign its own biological matrixes to whim and fashion, will in the end make us both the masters and creations of a new kind of evolution—human-created, faster, more diverse, and infinitely more complex and baroque than anything that has presently come into being on the surface of the Earth.

"The universe is not only stranger than we think, it is stranger than we *can* think," J.B. Priestly once declared. How wrong he was! The endless diversity of environments we can create in space and the endlessly diverse self-created mutations of humanity we will turn ourselves into when we inhabit them will be stranger and more varied by far than anything in the so-called "natural realm."

Thus do the thesis of "cyberpunk" and the antithesis of "humanism" unite in the synthesis of this new "Butorism," science fiction's new collective vision of our *multiplex* futures in space.

Thus too its happy paradox. In a sense, many science fiction writers do seem to be taking Michel Butor's advice. They have come together to create a new collective dream of space. But this collective dream is not a vision of uniformity but of infinitely multiplexed diversity, not of order and control but of chaos and romanticism reborn.

A vision that gives us back the dream of the solar system as an Arabian Nights fantasy of the infinite possible, of marvelous lands just beyond Earth's gravity well, ours not merely to conquer but to create. A literary creation achievable not by the willful disregard of the scientific realities but through their imaginative utilization.

The street finds its own uses for technology.

So does science fiction. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

There's a two-week lull before WorldCon, but then things pick up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (business) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). When writing, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent Filthy Pierre badge, making keyboard music.

AUGUST, 1987

25-Sep. 1—**Conspiracy '87.** For info, write: %. **Burns, 23 Kensington Ct, Hempstead NY 11550.** Or call: **(01) 340-9833** in the UK (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Brighton, England. (If city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Doris Lessing, Alfred Bester, Boris & Arkady Strugatsky, artist Jim Burns, SFXer Ray Harryhausen, Brian Aldiss, fans Dave Langford and Joyce & Ken Slater, others too numerous to mention. The 1987 World SF Con. At the Metropole Hotel.

28-30—**BuboniCon.** Albuquerque NM. Parke Goodwin, Bob Vardeman. At the Ramada Classic. A relaxed con to rest up for NASFiC next week, and mourn the fact that you couldn't get to WorldCon in the UK.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

3-7—**CactusCon.** Phoenix AZ. 1987 NASFiC. $50 advance, $60 at door. At the Hyatt Regency & Hilton.

18-20—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 968-5673.** Relaxacon, to rest up from NASFiC.

18-20—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-1611.** Jack ("The Humanoids") Williamson.

18-20—**Triangulum, Box 92456, Milwaukee WI 53202. (414) 327-7325.** Geo. R. R. Martin, D. Schmidt.

OCTOBER, 1987

2-4—**ConTradiction, Box 2403, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** Anne McCaffrey, Joan Vinge.

2-4—**TusCon, Box 26822, Tucson AZ 85726. (602) 881-3709.** S. (Mall World) Sucharitkul, Ed Bryant.

9-11—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Ben ("Colony") Bova, artist Kelly Freas, Hal ("Mission of Gravity") Clement, C. (Warlock) Stasheff. Out of the high school, at the Quality.

9-11—**ConStellation, %. NASFA, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** J. ("Superman") Schwartz. Low key.

9-11—**NonCon, Box 4506, Edmonton AB T6E 4T7.** B. Hambly, George Barr, E. Vonarburg, Janis Svilpis.

9-11—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (515) 443-3491.** B. Sterling, B. Meacham, Cadigan.

16-18—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244. (319) 396-6487.** Coralville IA. G. Cook, Joe Haldeman.

29-Nov. 1—**World Fantasy Con, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202.** Piers Anthony, artist Kelly Freas, Charles L. Grant, Karl Edward Wagner, Val & Ron Lindahn. Join quick for $50 (will sell out fast).

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** The 1988 World SF Con.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sept. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. WorldCon. $50 to 9/7.

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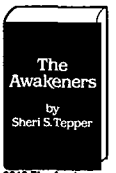

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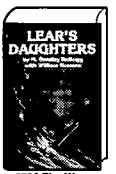

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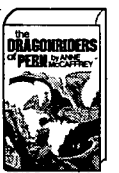

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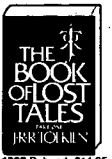

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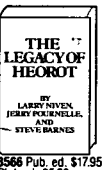

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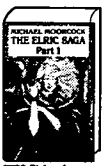

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